

Benefits of Retreat on Lam-rim

To all my dear students and friends who have just finished the Basic Program,

I think this is the best thing that you can achieve in the entire world – having done a three-month lam-rim retreat after having studied Basic Program for two years. This is really an excellent achievement!

The way this Basic Program is organized with the three-month retreat at the end is very, very special. Of course, at universities in different countries, it is possible to study Buddhist philosophy, but there is no retreat involved. No practice is involved.

These two things – study and practice – are key to making the mind familiar with the path to enlightenment. Study and practice give the real taste of buddhadharma. In this way, you become the real inner scientist. Even in the great monasteries where there is extensive learning on the path to enlightenment, after they finish exams there is no such thing as an organized retreat on the Dharma subjects they have studied, except of course if an individual from their own side plans that way. According to my wrong view, for many monks this does not happen.

Some monks while studying in the monastery do practice and meditate on the path like Dromtonpa expressed: “While I am listening, I am reflecting. While I am reflecting, I am meditating.” There are modern examples like Geshe Rabten and Lama Yeshe. While Geshe Rabten was in Madhyamaka class, he had realizations of the generation stage of tantra. During the puja in the hall with the monks, he could see himself clearly as Yamantaka. Geshe Rabten expressed this to the recent great meditator Jampa Wangdu, who earlier lived in the monastery as *as* *dob* *dob* and then lived in an isolated place, meditating and living on flower pills. Jampa Wangdu continued his meditation in India and had great success.

For the seven-year Masters Program I advised to do a one year lam-rim retreat. In the end some did, but only nine months. Some wanted to do it, but some didn’t understand and didn’t want to do it. Those who did the retreat discovered great benefit in their own hearts. Students who are not interested in retreat and practice should realize if they want something for their heart, if they love themselves and want to do something to affect their heart, and fill their hearts with great satisfaction, deep joy, and meaning, then this comes from retreat and practice.

I am extremely, extremely pleased. Even in the beginning there were some difficulties, but you all took my advice to do the retreat on lam-rim, so you experienced yourself; you got the real taste in your heart.

This fits with Lama Tsongkhapa’s advice. Lama Tsongkhapa said: “First, you should seek extensive listening of the extensive scriptures. In the middle, all the extensive scriptures should appear as advice (practice). At the end, practice all day and all night. I dedicate it all to the flourishing of the teachings of Buddha.” So you see, this fits with what you have

done, so I am not crazy! You all have studied the extensive teaching of Buddha and you have put it into practice by practicing the lam-rim, the stages of the path to enlightenment.

It is mentioned in the lam-rim teachings of the great Kadampa masters that when you are listening, explaining, and reflecting on lam-rim, you are shaking all the teachings of Buddha. This means the lam-rim is the heart of all the Buddha's teachings. This is the expression used.

So you can see here there is no puzzle. After studying all the five treatises, there is no confusion. You are not saying "I don't know how to practice." This sort of confusion happens even with many Tibetans – not knowing how to practice or how to integrate their studies, because of the lack of understanding of lam-rim practice. They do not know how to meditate after extensive study and then sometimes have to ask another lama of another tradition how to meditate.

Why retreat on the lam-rim? Because of every single teaching of Buddha, of all three vehicles, even one syllable appears as an instruction, as the practice of one person to achieve enlightenment. Not even one syllable should be left out of Buddha's teachings. The main goal of every single word of Buddha is to tame the mind, because your heart and mind is the creator of all the suffering of samsara, including the three lower realms. So when you transform your heart, you are the creator of your happiness and peace, liberation and enlightenment.

Why specifically lam-rim retreat? Because it has a very special presentation to subdue the mind. The cause of all suffering of all sentient beings, from where all the suffering and problems come from, now and in the future, is the mind. If you analyze throughout your life, you will see this clearly. You can also understand this from what Buddha said:

Do not engage in any harmful actions;
Perform only those that are good;
Subdue your own mind —
This is the teaching of the Buddha.

Whatever you do, if it does not subdue the delusions, it is not Dharma.

So again from the bottom of my heart, with both my hands, with my ten fingers together and joined at the heart, I thank all of you billions of times. What you have done is the best gift, the best offering to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Doing this kind of retreat – taming the mind through the lam-rim – is the best offering, the best benefit to all sentient beings, and the best way to bring world peace.

Lama Zopa

Colophon: Letter written to students of the Basic Program at Istituto Lama Tsong Khapa, Italy. August 14th 2007. Dictated to Ven Roger Kunsang, lightly edited by Ven Mindrol.

