

The Lam Rim of Tsongkhapa



1st monthly meeting of 3

Extracts from [*The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment, Volume 1*](#)
with Theosophical commentary in text boxes

A talk and study session on Sunday 28th April 2021
at The United Lodge of Theosophists, London, UK

Initial readings **PROLOGUE TO THE LAMRIM**

Homage to the guru Mañjughoṣa [Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva associated with wisdom].

I bow my head to the chief of the Śakyas,¹
Whose body was formed by ten million perfect virtues,
Whose speech fulfills the hopes of limitless beings,
Whose mind sees precisely all objects of knowledge.

I bow down to Ajita [Maitreya] and to Mañjughoṣa,
The supreme heirs of the unequaled teacher [the Buddha, the Conqueror].
Having assumed the burden of all the Conqueror's deeds,
They emanate in innumerable buddha-realms.

I bow to the feet of Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga,²
Thoroughly renowned throughout the three levels,
Ornaments of Jambudvīpa who wrote exact commentaries on the intent
Of the Mother of Conquerors,³ so difficult to fathom.

I bow to Dīpaṅkara [Atiṣa²], bearer of the treasury of instructions
That comprise the key points, unmistakable and complete,
Of the paths of the profound view and vast deeds,
Transmitted well from those two great trailblazers [Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga]. [...]

All those fortunate ones who are unobscured by the darkness of partisanship,
Who have the mental capacity to differentiate good and bad,
And who wish to make meaningful this good life of leisure
Should listen with one-pointed attention.

THE VOICE OF THE SILENCE

Tell him, O Candidate, that he who makes of pride and self-regard bond-maidens to devotion; that he, who cleaving to existence, still lays his patience and submission to the Law, as a sweet flower at the feet of Shakya-Thub-pa, [Buddha] becomes a Srotapatti [a disciple for Nirvana] in this birth. The Siddhis of perfection may loom far, far away; but the first step is taken, the stream is entered, and he may gain the eye-sight of the mountain eagle, the hearing of the timid doe.

Tell him, O Aspirant, that true devotion may bring him back the knowledge, that knowledge which was his in former births. The deva-sight and deva-hearing are not obtained in one short birth.

Be humble, if thou would'st attain to Wisdom.

Be humbler still, when Wisdom thou hast mastered.

Be like the Ocean which receives all streams and rivers. The Ocean's mighty calm remains unmoved; it feels them not.

Restrain by thy Divine thy lower Self. Restrain by the Eternal the Divine.

Aye, great is he, who is the slayer of desire. Still greater he, in whom the Self Divine has slain the very knowledge of desire.

(pages 40-41)

¹ Shakyas, a clan of the Vedic India 1,000 BCE from N. Indian Kshatriya Rajput warrior caste. The Solar Dynasty descended from Surya Bodhisattva (a celestial being), later from Ikshvaku of the Gita's Chapter 4 and the Maurya clan.

² Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga are the two strongest influences Tsongkhapa inherited from Atiṣa (called 'the Elder', 982–1054 AD) who was his great guide and to whom this Prologue is partly dedicated. For Asaṅga, see Āryasangha in the [Glossary](#).

³ "Mother of Conquerors" is the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras*. Wisdom is the mother of all the conquerors, i.e. the buddhas.

Commentary on the Prologue by Tsongkhapa:

Here the teaching that I will explain is how fortunate beings are led to buddhahood by way of the stages of the path to enlightenment that

- (1) contain the key points of all of the Conqueror's [Buddha's] scriptures,
- (2) are the pathways forged by two great trailblazers, Nagarjuna and Asaṅga,
- (3) are the system for supreme beings progressing to the state of omniscience, and
- (4) fully comprise all the stages practiced by the three types of persons.

... (as the teaching spread) it is said that it was important for its scholars to begin with three topics – the greatness of the author of the teaching, the greatness of the teaching, and how one should explain and listen to that teaching.... I will follow (this) in my explanation.

This explanation of the stages of the path to enlightenment has four parts:

1. Showing the greatness of the teaching's author in order to establish that it is of noble origin (**Chapter 1**)
2. Showing the greatness of the teaching in order to engender respect for the instructions (**Chapter 2**)
3. How to listen to and explain the teachings (**Chapter 3**)
4. How to lead students with the actual instructions (Chapters 4 and on)

The texts in bold are included in this first session of three

CHAPTER 1 overview & excerpts

ATISHA 'the Elder'; Tsongkhapa's key influence

I. Showing the greatness of the teaching's author in order to establish that it is of noble origin

These instructions, in general, are those of the Ornament for Clear Knowledge composed by the venerable Maitreya. In particular, the text for this work is Atisha's *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*; hence, the very author of the Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment is also the author of this [work].

ON THE HISTORY OF BUDDHISM & TANTRA from an account by the Dalai Lama's older brother

Atisha was a prominent 10th century Indian Buddhist teacher who, amongst other things, gave out what became the Lamrim teaching (his book "*Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*") and founded what was known as the Kadampa Tradition. Around 230 years after Buddhism had been established as the national religion of Tibet, Atisha went there and stayed for the remainder of his life. The present Dalai Lama's elder brother, Thubten Jigme Norbu (1922-2008), writes in his 1968 book "[*Tibet: An Account of the History, The Religion & The People of Tibet*](#)":

"On arrival at Tholing, the monastic center of Western Tibet, Atisha saw the terrible state of degeneration that had come about through a misunderstanding of the tantras, but he refused to give in to those who counseled that they should be abolished. He set about teaching the tantras as only a philosopher of his stature could, elevating them to the highest spiritual level, removing them

from any but symbolic connection with physical action. He himself, however, advised that only two of the four tantric initiations should generally be considered since the other two could mislead the aspirant.... At the same time that he supported the tantras, however, Atisha also taught the pure Theg Chen [i.e. Mind Training] doctrine, free of all tantric elements. One of his greatest contributions to Tibetan Buddhist literature is a discourse in pure Theg Chen tradition upon the different goals that man may set for himself and their relative value.... Here he clearly said that the tantras should only be followed by those who had passed through the previous stages of ethical (Theg Men) and philosophical reflection (Theg Chen), and that the actual practice of tantra was a purely spiritual affair, in no way calling for a female counterpart or the use of intoxicants, and in no way permissible for the selfish goal of self-advancement." (Norbu, 181-2)

By the time Atisha died, a certain degree of much needed reform had occurred within Tibetan Buddhism. Around 350 years later, further reform, this time by Tsongkhapa, would result in the establishment of the *New Kadampa Tradition*, this being the original name by which the Geluggas were known. When Tsongkhapa founded the Gelugpa (or New Kadampas) in 1409, he introduced a series of vows which Norbu explains were "taken by monks as they pass from one grade to another, each grade demanding a higher level of renunciation." The "four main vows" were "to refrain from killing, stealing, having sexual intercourse, and lying," (Norbu, p. 202) all of which acts, incidentally, are promoted in various forms of Tibetan Buddhist tantra.¹ Norbu says that he did not, however, endeavour to wipe out every last trace and vestige of the tantric influences, as he reportedly felt that this would drastically limit his audience and thus the amount of people who could learn and benefit from him and his work. Therefore, "he took the old Gods and demons, images and paintings of which filled the temples and monasteries of the day and nearly all of which had non-Buddhist origins, and he taught the symbolic meaning of each.... the Tantric symbols and practices were transmuted for use simply as symbols "with a view to right understanding" on higher planes of mentation."

Norbu writes that Tsongkhapa emphasised that the right application of knowledge and power requires the highest training in ethics and the license that the old sects indulged in was not allowed, "... the use of liquor and narcotics was equally forbidden to all Gelukpa, and once again Tsong Khapa saw that it was best to stress the symbolic meaning of intoxication and of meat eating – another practice which some old sects said had spiritual power."

Sadly – and perhaps unsurprisingly, in light of the corruption which every great reformer's work seems fated to be subjected to – these tantric elements of Gelugpa teaching have nonetheless been taken literally and in their material and physiological sense for several hundred years now and are endorsed by the Dalai Lama and all Gelugpa leaders.

Tsongkhapa's second best known work "*Ngakrim Chenmo*" ("*The Great Exposition of Secret Mantra*") has become corrupted with tantric practices and but we can only assume, in light of Norbu's words and Theosophical explanations, that he did not write it that way. H. P. Blavatsky's "Theosophical Glossary" entry for "Tantra" says with italicised emphasis that although there is such a thing as "white tantra" there is also sexual tantra which is "*the worst form of black magic or sorcery.*"

Tsongkhapa's *Lamrim* takes in many places a strongly reforming tone and the need to reinstitute Buddha's high ethics and free his original sutras from the overgrowth and speculations of the centuries.

¹ See [Theosophical Notes, Newsletter No. 5](#), "*The Dalai Lama and Two Forms of Tantra*" from page 18-23, and for further details on this, the article [Geluggas, Tantra and Theosophy](#).

CHAPTER 2 overview & excerpts

THE GREATNESS OF THE TEACHING

II. Showing the greatness of the teaching in order to engender respect for the instructions

The greatness of the teaching is indicated by four qualities it elicits in the student:

- A. The greatness of enabling one to know that all of the teachings are free of contradiction**
- B. The greatness of enabling one to understand that all of the scriptures are instructions for practice**
- C. The greatness of enabling one easily to find the Conqueror's intent**
- D. The greatness of enabling one to refrain automatically from great wrongdoing

Concerning the teaching to be explained, the root text of these instructions is the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*. There are many texts composed by the Elder, but the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* is comprehensive and fundamental. Since it teaches by drawing together the key points of both the sutra and mantra vehicles, its subject matter is comprehensive; since it emphasizes the stages of disciplining the mind, it is easy to put into practice; and since it is adorned with the instructions of two gurus who were skilled in the systems of the two great trailblazers,⁴ it is superior to other systems.

A. The greatness of enabling one to know that all of the teachings are free of contradiction

With regard to the teachings, Avalokitavrata's Commentary on the "*Lamp for Wisdom*" says:

Concerning "teachings," the scriptures of the Bhagavan accurately teach that which is to be thoroughly known, that which is to be eliminated, that which is to be manifested, and that which is to be cultivated by deities and humans who wish to attain the ambrosial state [of a nonabiding nirvana].

Thus the teachings are what the Conqueror explained well. Here, to know that all the teachings are free of contradiction means to understand that they are the path by which one person becomes a buddha. Some are the main points of the path; some are the various branches of the path.

Bodhisattvas make it their goal to accomplish the good of the world [all living beings]. Since bodhisattvas must take care of students who are followers of all three lineages [those of *śravakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and bodhisattvas], they must train in the paths of those three lineages.

And, Dharmakirti's Commentary on the "*Compendium of Valid Cognition*" says:

It is difficult to explain to others
The results of causes that are obscure to oneself.

Therefore, if you have not ascertained something exactly, you cannot teach it to others.

By stating, "Those benefactors of beings who accomplish the good of the world through the knowledge of paths ...," Ajita indicates that knowing the paths of the three vehicles is the method for bodhisattvas to achieve the goal they have set. Also the Mother of Conquerors says:

⁴ Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga.

Bodhisattvas should produce all paths – whatever is a path of a *śravaka*, a *pratyekabuddha*, or a buddha – and should know all paths. They should also perform the deeds of these paths and bring all of them to completion.

Thus, it is contradictory to propound that you should not train in the scriptural collections of the Hinayana because you are a Mahayana practitioner.

[... here Tsongkhapa enters into a detailed argument why this is just.]

The Precious Teacher said, "My guru [Atisha] is the one who knows how to bring all of the teachings within a four-sided path." These words are very meaningful.

Because these instructions in the Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment guide students by gathering all the key points of the sutra and mantra vehicles into the path for one person to become a buddha, they have the greatness of producing the certainty that all of the teachings are free of contradiction.

"Well; if in the different spheres contradictory doctrines are propounded, these doctrines cannot contain the Truth, for Truth is *One*, and cannot admit of diametrically opposite views." (Mahatma K.H.)

"We have no two beliefs or hypotheses on the same subject." (H. P. Blavatsky, "[The Key to Theosophy](#)" p. 87)

B. The greatness of enabling one to understand that all of the scriptures are instructions for practice

In general, only the scriptures of the Conqueror [Buddha] provide the means to achieve all temporary and ultimate benefit and happiness for those who desire liberation, for only the Buddha is free from all error in teaching what is to be adopted and what is to be cast aside.

There are those who conclude that any classic text should be considered only an explanatory teaching, therefore lacking the key points for practice. They hold that there are separate personal instructions that teach the core meanings that are the heart of practice. They then imagine that there are two separate forms of the excellent teaching—a teaching that is explained to you and a teaching that you practice. Know that this attitude precludes the development of great respect for the stainless sutras and tantras as well as the flawless treatises that comment on their intent. Know also that you accumulate the karmic obstruction of abandoning the teaching when you see those classic texts as objects of contempt and say, "Those are merely for promoting one's superficial knowledge and eliminating others' misconceptions; they do not teach the deep meaning."

Therefore, for those who desire liberation, the supreme and authentic instructions are indeed the classic texts. However, due to your limited intelligence and so forth, you may be unable to recognize those texts as the supreme instructions through depending on them alone. Thus, you must seek out personal instructions, thinking,

"I will seek certain knowledge of those texts based on the personal instructions of an excellent being."

But do not think,

"The texts are without substance, since they merely promote a superficial knowledge and eliminate others' misconceptions; yet the personal instructions, since they reveal the deep meaning, are supreme." [...]

The Precious Teacher [Drom-don-ba] said that it is a mistake if, after studying many teachings, you feel a need to look elsewhere for how to practice the teaching. Thus, there are those who have studied many teachings for a long time, but do not know at all how to practice the teaching. When they wish to practice, they must look elsewhere. Their error is in not understanding what I have already explained. [...]

By doing this, you will understand that all of the scriptures are instructions for practice. Otherwise, you will spend your entire life without discerning wisdom, practicing just some incomplete portion of the path and not the complete corpus. Thus you will not understand that the classic texts are instructions for practice, but you will abandon them, seeing them as merely promoting superficial knowledge and eliminating others' misconceptions.

“In these matters there is no child’s play nor the usual English and American method of mere book-learning, – we must absorb and work into the practice and the theory laid down, for they are not written merely for the *intellect*, but for the whole spiritual nature. There must be within the man something which he already knows, that leaps up and out when he scans the books of wisdom; a thing already existing, which only takes an added life or confirmation from books. True Theosophy has all that is practical, but many forget this; there is no greater system of practice than that required by it.” (William Q. Judge, “*Answers to Questioners*”)

“The recognition of H.P.B. as the accredited Agent and Messenger of Masters, carries with it her estimation of William Q. Judge, her colleague from first to last. A study of the writings of both will show their full accord and complementary nature. H.P.B. presented the philosophy as a whole; William Q. Judge exemplified its practical use in daily life; his writings for the most part are devoted to that purpose, hence their incalculable value.” (Robert Crosbie, “*Thoughts on The New Year,*” “*Theosophy*” magazine, January 1916)

“What is Theosophy? It shows itself to be as divine a message as any ever given to the world of men, and a more complete one.... H. P. Blavatsky and William Q. Judge, in their capacity of Messengers, cannot be separated; They stand or fall together.... Their writings are mutually corroborative and complementary. Studied together, they embody the noblest religious ideal, the highest all-inclusive philosophy, the most practical application; giving the science of life, the art of living, the very knowledge that humanity stands in crying need of.” (Robert Crosbie, “*William Q. Judge and The Theosophical Movement,*” “*Theosophy*” magazine, November 1912)

C. The greatness of enabling one easily to find the Conqueror's intent

The classic texts – the scriptures along with their commentaries – are the supreme instructions. Yet, even if beginners – persons without extensive training – delve in to them, they will not discover their intended meaning without depending on the personal instructions of an excellent being. Even if they find the intended meaning, their search will require a very long time and a great deal of effort. However, if they depend on the personal instructions of a guru,⁵ they will easily come to know the intended meaning.

These instructions of the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* will readily bestow certain knowledge of the key points of the Buddha's word and the treatises. I will explain at length how this is done in the appropriate sections below.

⁵ In Theosophy the ‘guru’ is the teachings & explanations left by H. P. Blavatsky, William Q. Judge and the Masters. HPB is sometimes spoken of by ULT associates as “our Guru” but B. P. Wadia cautions that only those who studiously, humbly, and devotedly study and apply her teachings ought to think or speak of her as such, lest it border on personality worship.

CHAPTER 3

excerpts

HOW TO LISTEN TO AND EXPLAIN THE TEACHINGS

1. Contemplating the benefits of hearing the teaching

The Verses about Hearing (Śruti-varga) in the Collection of Indicative Verses (Udana-varga)⁶ says:
[...]

Just as someone dwelling inside a house
Enshrouded in complete darkness
Has eyes but does not see
The forms that are there,
So, also, a person born of noble lineage
Although possessing intelligence,
Does not know until told
What is virtuous and what is not.
Just as one with eyes
Sees forms by using a lamp,
So through hearing what is virtuous and what is not,
You will understand what should be done.

Also:

The result of hearing is to engage in substantive practice;
You will be released with little difficulty from the fortress of rebirth.

Develop enthusiasm from the depths of your heart with regard to these benefits of hearing.

2. Developing reverence for the teaching and the instructor

The Sutra of Kṣitigarbha says:

Listen to the teachings with one-pointed faith and respect.
Do not censure or deride the speaker;
Honor your instructors –
Develop the idea that they are like a buddha.

Thus, as this says, view the instructor as being like a buddha. Eliminate disrespect; honor him or her with homage and goods by offering a lion throne and the like.

Also, as the Bodhisattva Levels⁷ sets forth, listen without the afflictions [of arrogance and contempt] and without bringing to mind the five conditions of an instructor. *Being free from arrogance* means to listen with the following six attributes: (1) listening at an appropriate time, (2) showing homage, (3) showing deference, (4) not being resentful, (5) practicing according to the instructor's words, and (6) not looking for the chance to argue.

Being free from contempt means to respect the teaching and the one who gives it and not to belittle these two. *Not bringing to mind the five conditions* means to cast away the thought, "I will not

⁶ This is the Tibetan Buddhist version of the Dhammapada and differs in various ways from the better known Dhammapada of the Theravada Pali canon.

⁷ See Appendix A, "The 10 Bodhisattva Levels" on page 10.

listen to this person because he or she (1) has fallen from ethical discipline, (2) is of poor lineage, (3) has an unattractive physical appearance, (4) is inarticulate, (5) or speaks harshly and unpleasantly."

"If one cannot abide the personality of the woman [i.e. HPB] whom I believe They have chosen for the particular work of the T.S., then of course one cannot expect help from Them in Their special attitude of aiders of the T.S., however much They may be willing to help a man in other directions. The personality of HPB is and always will be a stumbling block for many persons and if it were not so, and so deliberately, then we would not have a true or even an approach to a true T.S., for had she been all that one could wish in the way of loveliness of character then the members would not think for themselves but would bow down and offer to her the worship which it is the object of the T.S. to root out of the mind of the age." (William Q. Judge, letter to Dr. Hubbe-Schleiden, November 1890)

"Even among their [i.e. referring to Buddha, Jesus, and other great Teachers] immediate disciples, suspicion, doubt, jealousy, fear, resentment and self-interest were to be found, none of which could have had existence had the real nature of the teacher been understood. These conditions prevented the true relation between teacher and disciple which is so necessary to the latter if he would benefit fully from that relation. It is true that all the disciples learned something in spite of their defects, but it is also true that the lack of intuitive perception of the divine nature of their teachers was the most important factor in the failure of those disciples to truly transmit the teachings they had received; for that lack closed the door in themselves through which the divine enlightenment could come. Even Arjuna, loyal and devoted disciple as he was, had failed to perceive the wondrous nature of his teacher. It was not until that teacher by his favor and power had caused "the divine eye" in Arjuna to open that the ability to see on that plane of substance was gained. It is natural to suppose that Arjuna had by his unshaken confidence and constant devotion arrived at a stage of development where such help was merited." (Robert Crosbie, "Notes on the Bhagavad Gita" p. 177-178)

To be continued on Sundays 30th May & 27th June 2021

with practical instructions on 'the three trainings'

higher moral discipline (Shila),
higher concentration (Dhyana) and
higher wisdom (Prajna)

Appendix A:

THE 10 BODHISATTVA LEVELS

The ten Bodhisattva Levels, also known as the ten Bhumis, are first presented in the Ten Stages (Dashabhūmika in Sanskrit) Sutra, in which the Buddha enumerates them as –

1. **The first bhūmi, the Very Joyous.** (Skt. *pramuditā*), in which one rejoices at realizing a partial aspect of the truth;
2. **The second bhūmi, the Stainless.** (Skt. *vimalā*), in which one is free from all defilement;
3. **The third bhūmi, the Light-Maker.** (Skt. *prabhākarī*), in which one radiates the light of wisdom;
4. **The fourth bhūmi, the Radiant Intellect.** (Skt. *arciṣmatī*), in which the radiant flame of wisdom burns away earthly desires;
5. **The fifth bhūmi, the Difficult to Master.** (Skt. *sudurjayā*), in which one surmounts the illusions of darkness, or ignorance as the Middle Way;
6. **The sixth bhūmi, the Manifest.** (Skt. *abhimukhī*) in which supreme wisdom begins to manifest;
7. **The seventh bhūmi, the Gone Afar.** (Skt. *dūraṅgamā*), in which one rises above the states of the Two vehicles;
8. **The eighth bhūmi, the Immovable.** (Skt. *acalā*), in which one dwells firmly in the truth of the Middle Way and cannot be perturbed by anything;
9. **The ninth bhūmi, the Good Intelligence.** (Skt. *sādhumatī*), in which one preaches the Law freely and without restriction;
10. **The tenth bhūmi, the Cloud of Doctrine.** (Skt. *dharmameghā*), in which one benefits all sentient beings with the Law (Dharma), just as a cloud sends down rain impartially on all things.