A Note from the Publisher

We hope you will enjoy this Wisdom book. For your convenience, this digital edition is delivered to you without “digital rights management” (DRM). This makes it easier for you to use across a variety of digital platforms, as well as preserve in your personal library for future device migration.

Our nonprofit mission is to develop and deliver to you the very highest quality books on Buddhism and mindful living. We hope this book will be of benefit to you, and we sincerely appreciate your support of the author and Wisdom with your purchase. If you’d like to consider additional support of our mission, please visit our website at wisdompubs.org.
The Essential Nectar
The Essential Nectar
Meditations on the Buddhist Path

Geshe Rabten

An explanation of the Lam rim text
of Yeshe Tsöndrü entitled
The Essential Nectar of the Holy Doctrine,
and the text itself

Editing and verse translation
by Martin Willson

Wisdom Publications · Boston
## Contents

**PREFACE**  7  
**INTRODUCTION** by Geshe Rabten  15  
**THE PREPARATORY PRACTICES (1–96)**  29  
**THE ACTUAL PRACTICE**  
*Part One: Basics*  55  
1 Meditation 1: Guru Devotion (97–139)  57  
2 Meditation 2: The Opportune, Fortunate Rebirth (140–176)  67  
*Part Two: Path of the Inferior Person*  79  
3 Meditation 3: Death (177–209)  82  
4 Meditation 4: The Sufferings of the Realms of Woe (210–238)  91  
5 Meditation 5: The Practice of Taking Refuge (239–252)  105  
6 Meditation 6: How to Generate Confidence in the Laws of Actions and Results (253–264)  112  
*Part Three: Path of the Intermediate Person*  119  
7 Meditation 7: The Sufferings of the Happier Realms and the General Sufferings of Samsara (265–296)  121  
8 Meditation 8: How to Think about the Process of Functioning of Samsara, and Practise the Path to Liberation (297–304)  132
Preface

The root text by Yeshe Tsöndrü, used by Geshe Rabten in his explanation and published here, presents concisely and in their order of development all the meditations and practices involved in entering the Buddhist Path and proceeding along it towards Enlightenment, up to the point at which one is ready to practise Tantra. It is written entirely in verse, so that one can easily memorize it and use it in meditation.

Historically, it stands in a long tradition of Tibetan teachings on the Lam rim, the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment. The lineage goes back through the founder of the Gelukpa school, Je Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), to the Bengali pandit Atisha (982-1054), who taught in Tibet for thirteen years. Atisha himself combined into a harmonious whole two earlier Indian traditions, one concentrating mainly on Wisdom and the other emphasizing more the practice of Method, or Compassion, whose most prominent exponents were Nāgārjuna (second century AD) and Asaṅga (fourth century) respectively. Ultimately, of course, all these teachings derive from Shākyamuni Buddha.

The Buddhist scriptures being of immense bulk and chaotic arrangement, the need for condensed and systematic presentations of the Teachings is evident. Even while Sutras were still being written, Nāgārjuna compiled an anthology of scrip-
tural quotations arranged under subject headings, his Siūra-
samuccaya (Compendium of Sutra). Later, about the eighth
century AD, Shāntideva composed a Compendium on the Train-
ings (Sikṣā-samuccaya), again basically on anthology of quo-
tations from the Sutras. Atiśa’s text, the Lamp on the Path to
Enlightenment (Bodhipatha-pradīpa) was a short verse outline of
the Stages of the Path. His scholarly Tibetan successors ex-

dpanded it into comprehensive textbooks such as Gampopa’s
(1079–1153) Jewel Ornament of Liberation and Tsongkhapa’s
Great Stages of the Path (Lam rim chen mo), organized under an
elaborate hierarchy of headings and establishing each point by
reasoning and scriptural citation. Tsongkhapa’s massive and
complex work is more an exposition of the theoretical basis of
the practice than an actual meditational guide. Therefore, many
shorter and more practical texts have been written, presenting
the material important to meditate on; the present text is one of
these.

It begins with the preliminaries that any Buddhist practi-
tioner should perform daily – taking Refuge in the Three
Jewels, generating a proper motivation of Bodhicitta and the
Four Immeasurables, offering a seven-limbed puja to the
Objects of Refuge, and praying for success in the practice. Then
the actual meditations on the Stages of the Path are described,
from Guru Devotion up to Special Insight and entry into the
Tantric Path.

First, the root of the Path, devotion to one’s Guru or spiritual
teacher, is to be cultivated. Then, one appraises one’s present
situation and its remarkable potentialities, the eighteen factors
of opportunity and good fortune one has gained in this life
although they are so rarely found. This makes it obvious that
one must take advantage of this opportunity by practising the
Dharma.

The rest of the Lam rim describes how one should take
advantage of it. It is divided into three Paths according to the
level of one’s motivation. Inferior motivation, the lowest that
still serves for Dharma practice, is concern for one’s next life
more than for happiness in this life. Intermediate motivation
seeks one’s complete Liberation from the round of rebirth,
recognizing that even in the happiest states of samsara one is still
bound to suffering. The superior motivation, that of the Bodhisattva, is not content with one's own Liberation but insists that one help all other sentient beings to become free of suffering also. If one wishes to be a Bodhisattva, one must meditate on all three Paths: each forms the basis for proceeding to the next.

This text was, of course, not written for Westerners. If it had been, it would have been necessary to preface the account of the Stages with a section on how to convince oneself of the reality of rebirth. For this simple fact of life, unquestioned by the Tibetans of a happier age, and on which most of the arguments presented depend, has been rigorously suppressed in our culture for some one-and-a-half millennia. First, the Christian church banned the teaching of rebirth (implicitly accepted by the early church fathers),¹ no doubt for fear that it would encourage laziness, while latterly the materialist orthodoxy of our own day pours ridicule on all reports of phenomena inconsistent with its dogmas, greeting their authors as liars and charlatans, or at best gullible fools.

Rebirth may be established by logical proof, appeal to authority, or observation. However, since the “proofs” take as their premises assumptions about the nature of mind that are just as difficult to establish and contradictory to Western orthodoxy as the fact of rebirth itself, and the sceptics have their own authorities, observation is by far the most convincing. Here, there are one's own observations, and those of others. One can acquire the power of recalling one's previous lives if, having realized Quietude (verses 385–393 below), one goes on to develop the four dhyānas. However, to reach this point one must already have traversed most of the Stages of the Path here described, so to start with, unless one resorts to methods not traditionally Buddhist, one must rely on the testimony of others. That available in print ranges from Dr. Ian Stevenson’s investigations, with meticulous scientific method, of numerous cases where children have spontaneously recalled their preceding life, through life stories of Tibetan Rinpoches, to a flood of recent literature vividly describing recollections of past lives gained through hypnosis, Hindu yoga methods, or indeed yoga methods learned in past lives in Ancient Egypt.²

A related stumbling-block for the sceptical Westerner is the
supposed existence of realms that we cannot detect – the hells and the realms of pretas and gods. On this matter, apart from numerous reports of ghosts, the Western evidence is comparatively scanty. In the literature just mentioned, I have so far found only one instance each of people remembering past lives as an animal, a preta, and what could be described as a special sort of hell being. However, this is not surprising. It is clear from the accounts that the past lives that people recall are those which exert a strong karmic influence on the present life. Since it is taught that when born in a realm of woe one has virtually no chance to create karma leading to a human rebirth, there is no reason to expect people to recall such births. And again, if high rebirth is as rare as is taught, one would not expect people to remember lives as gods.

On the other hand, it may be objected that the intervals between the past human lives recalled by one person are rarely more than a few centuries, and leave no room for intervening stays in hell or preta realms of the duration described in verses 225, 228 and 234. To this, one might point out that the large numbers found in Buddhist texts are often not to be taken literally but are there to give a certain impression in meditation, and who can doubt that subjectively even a second of the cataclysmic suffering of Avici would indeed seem like years?

But if these durations are not meant literally, maybe the whole idea of realms of woe is really symbolic, a kind of stylization of sufferings one can actually encounter in the human realm? This interpretation is not impossible, although it is clearly not what the author intended. Deluged with information about the world we live in, we of the West at least cannot escape the dreadful truth – that virtually any form of torture which the human mind can imagine, humans actually do inflict on other humans. Moreover, considering that there are very likely more inhabited planets in this galaxy alone than there are human beings on Earth, it would not be reasonable to suppose that some are not a great deal more unpleasant than ours.

The physical tortures of the hells and other realms of woe are also a practical way to visualize mental tortures, which the mind inflicts on itself as a result of having harmed others. Thus whether or not they represent a literal, physical reality, they
certainly represent a psychological reality. No justification can be found for dismissing these painful meditations as mere morbid fantasy, however comforting this might be.

The style of the text is exceptionally clear and straightforward, almost as if written for children – there is none of the convoluted grammar and excessive compression found in philosophical works, nor is the meaning concealed beneath heavy blankets of flowery metaphors. The author just states one idea plainly, then moves on to the next. His language includes a number of modern words not found in the Scriptures, so it would be inappropriate to translate it into an archaic, “biblical” style.

None of the material is the author’s invention: all the details of the hells and so on come from standard texts, and the similes given here and there are likewise traditional, mostly originating in the Sutras. His contribution is to select what to put in, and give it harmonious expression in verse.

Three metres are employed in the body of the text. Most verses are in the commonest of Tibetan metres, nine-syllable lines with the odd syllables stressed. However, the sections on the opportune, fortunate rebirth and death (verses 140–209) are in an unusual metre of eight-syllable lines, stressed on the first and then the even syllables. This awkward rhythm, with its isolated first syllable, gives a restless, uneasy effect, appropriate to the sense of urgency that these meditations are designed to inculcate. I regret I found it too difficult to reproduce this in English. The sections on suffering are also distinguished by a special metre – fifteen-syllable lines, stressed on the odd syllables, as is normal, but divided into half-lines of eight plus seven syllables. The effective line length is thus shorter than elsewhere, producing a quickening of pace, suggestive of the ceaseless rain of sufferings that falls on us as long as we are in samsara.

In English one is not free to omit syllables virtually at will, as is done in Tibetan, so one must allow extra unstressed syllables. However, I have found it perfectly possible to maintain the same number of stressed syllables as in the original, without departing from a strictly literal rendering appreciably more than one would wish to do in a prose translation. There seems to be
simply no need to resort to prose translation with a work of this nature.

Geshe Rabten delivered some thirty-one discourses on this text, at Tharpa Choeling on Friday afternoons spread over the period January 1981 to June 1982.

In adapting this course into book form I have freely rearranged the material so as to bring out the underlying logical structure as clearly as possible; for example, when Geshe Rabten went over a topic again at the start of another discourse, this recapitulation has been merged with the original discussion. Unnecessary repetitions have been reduced, bearing in mind that a certain amount of repetition is intrinsic to the subject, but although the edited version has about forty percent as many words as the original oral translation, it is believed that nothing significant has been omitted. Translations of recognizable technical terms have been standardized, and headings superimposed, after the root text and Lam rim chen mo. The division into “Meditations” follows Yeshe Tsöndrü’s marking of the end of a section with a request for inspiration or with a change of metre. Additions made for the sake of clarity are enclosed in square brackets, and should be in strict accord with the tradition within which Geshe Rabten was teaching – in fact, most additions longer than a few words are quoted directly from the Lam rim chen mo, as indicated in the notes. While I have once or twice allowed myself to comment from the viewpoint of a Western scientist, such remarks are confined to the notes. Where the notes cite authorities in apparent conflict with Geshe Rabten’s explanation, this should not be construed as implying that the latter is in any way inferior, but merely that a range of legitimate opinions exists. Quotations could not always be identified with certainty from the oral translation, but those given are at least very similar and are authentic. Except in one instance, they are in my own translation from the Tibetan.

The root text has been printed as a consecutive whole, not broken up by commentary, for the convenience of those who
wish to use the text for its intended purpose, namely meditation. The explanation is meant to be studied outside meditation sessions, while the root text is skilfully designed to give all the outlines one needs for the session itself.

The translation of the root text was made and released to students early in Geshe Rabten’s course. This was possible thanks to the Lam rim teachings I had received from Geshe Thubten Lodan, Lama Zasep Tulku, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, Geshe Rabten and others. Comparison with the existing prose translation by Geshe Lobsang Tharchin and Benjamin and Deborah Alterman greatly facilitated checking and resulted in many improvements. Some further revisions were made subsequently in the light of Geshe Rabten’s teachings.

M. A. G. W.
Tharpa Choeling,
April 1981, revised June 1983.
Introduction

WHAT IS LAM RIM?

Lam, the Path, is all the mental states and good qualities that take us from our present state to Enlightenment. The practice that leads to Enlightenment is not a mere tradition of certain countries, but something that benefits whoever engages in it.

This Path that leads to Enlightenment was taught by the Buddha Himself. Sometimes He taught different aspects of the Path, such as the Method and Wisdom aspects; at other times He taught the Path as a whole, all the various aspects together. Likewise, in such texts as Abhisamayālaṃkāra, Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra and Madhyamakāvatāra we find all the Buddha’s teachings, but arranged in different ways. This is not a mistake – each arrangement was chosen to suit the abilities of the particular disciples being taught.

The Lam rim, then, is a presentation of the Path (lam), conveying all the points arranged in a systematic, sequential order (rim): first do this, then do that. Thus if we wish to practise it, there is little danger of making mistakes.

GREATNESSES OF THIS TEACHING
1  The Greatness of realizing that all the teachings are non-contradictory

The intelligent can understand the many different teachings of
the Buddha, and perceive that they are of the same nature. Some, however, may regard certain teachings as correct and others as incorrect, while others will see it just the other way round. For example, some have partial views of the Sutras and Tantras, saying the Sutras are genuine and the Tantras not, or vice versa; or within the Sutras, they may say the Mahāyāna is the real Path and the Hinayāna is not, or vice versa. Through studying the Lam rim, one comes to understand that these different aspects of the Buddha's Teachings are not contradictory, but all form one Teaching, much as a skilful cook combines many foods into one delicious meal.

2 The Greatness of all the Buddha's Speech appearing as instructions

When one pushes the corner of a table, it is not just the corner that moves, but the whole table starts to turn. Similarly, when someone who really knows how to meditate on Lam rim contemplates one point, his understanding of all the points will be affected. For example, meditating properly on Devotion to the Guru, the opportune, fortunate rebirth, or the Path of the inferior person, will affect one's understanding of all the other points such as the Wisdom cognizing Emptiness, [so that one comes to realize that all of them are to be practised].

3 The Greatness of easily discovering the Conqueror's Thought

The Thought or Intention (dgongs pa) of the Buddha is threefold: Renunciation, Bodhicitta, and Right View. If we wish to develop the practices leading to Renunciation, for example, it will be much easier and more straightforward to do so following the Lam rim teachings than following one of the great Indian or Tibetan texts such as Candrakīrti's Madhyamakāvatāra or Je Tsongkhapa's commentary on it, dbU ma dgongs pa rab gsal.

4 The Greatness of the automatic cessation of great misconduct

In our present, ordinary lives, we have many faults of body, speech and mind. Another virtue of the Lam rim is that when we practise it, these faults are automatically reduced. At each stage, everything adverse to that meditation diminishes – practising the Path of the inferior person reduces faulty conduct
related to this life; practising that of the intermediate person reduces misconduct in relation to the next life, and so on.

While the Lam rim has these four qualities, we should note that the Lam rim is not the same as the person who is studying it or trying to practise it—he does not necessarily have these qualities too! He may be making mistakes and going in the wrong direction. It is always important for the practitioner to have the right attitude. We shall return to this point later.

SOURCE OF THE LAM RIM

While the actual root of the Lam rim is the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñā-paramitā) sutras taught by the Buddha, the effective root is the short text by Atisha called Lamp on the Path to Enlightenment (Bodhi-patha-pradīpa), because it is here that this particular presentation of the Path is made for the first time. There are two great “chariots” or traditions of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Wisdom Lineage of Nāgārjuna and the Method Lineage of Asaṅga. Atisha received both these traditions, the former from Vidyā-kokila the elder, the latter from Dharmakīrti of Suvarṇadvīpa (Sumatra), and combined the two ways of practice.

These traditions individually place much emphasis on the understanding of the texts; their approach, though effective, is rather difficult. Going directly to the Lam rim, one can develop the same kind of understanding with much greater ease.

Also, in the older Indian traditions, texts were rigidly divided into Sutra and Tantra, and the Sutra texts further into Hinayāna and Mahāyāna, the different categories never being mixed. The Lam rim, however, brings together all these different aspects of the Path and shows how they inter-relate. We can see that although short, the Lam rim combines all these teachings without confusion or contradiction.

Besides the Lam rim texts that we study in the Gelukpa tradition, there are others such as Gampopa’s Jewel Ornament of Liberation in the Kagyü tradition, and the Nyingmapa text Oral Precepts of Guru Samantabhadra. We can see for ourselves what an excellent text the Jewel Ornament of Liberation is. All these Lam rim texts, of every tradition, stem from the same
root, the Bodhi-patha-pradipa of Atisha, and follow its outlines.

Based on this same root text of Atisha, the great Tsong-khapa wrote his commentary Lam rim chen mo, the Great Lam rim, of over 500 pages; his Middling Lam rim, of some 200 pages, which omits the quotations to leave only his own composition; and his short Condensed meaning of the Lam rim, which can easily be memorized and recited.

**HOW THE LAM RIM IS TO BE TAUGHT**

Three ways of teaching are enumerated:

(a) The teacher explains in great detail the meaning of each word and of each quotation and just how to practise the meditations. By practising as taught, the disciples increase their understanding.

(b) Besides his detailed explanations, the teacher speaks from the depth of his own experience. Each disciple, too, rather than just listening passively, tries to integrate the explanations into his own mind.

(c) The teacher explains from his own experience one point, such as the first, Devotion to the Guru, then the disciples go and meditate on it, the teacher helping them with any problems that arise. Then, once this point has become reasonably clear to them, the teacher goes on to the next point.

The third is really the best – this is the way Dharmakirti taught Atisha, and Marpa taught Milarepa – but it is rather difficult. We shall use method (b), where the teacher draws on his own experience and the pupils try to perceive it for themselves.

**PROBLEMS IN LAM RIM MEDITATION**

As we know, when we meditate on Lam rim there can arise nervous problems, or lung, a certain lack of mental ease. It may help to explain the possible causes of this now:

(a) If in a previous life one has caused great fear in or harm to someone else, one may experience mental disturbance in this life.
(b) Certain external interferences such as various sorts of spirits can disturb the mind.
(c) Imbalance of the four physical elements making up the body can induce mental imbalance.
(d) Experiencing very great suffering can make the mind deeply disturbed.
(e) When one is working very hard at study or meditation, sok-lung can arise with no apparent reason. This is the worst sort of lung.

Some Tibetans just used to play, without being made to do any sort of work, until they were twenty or more; they were quite relaxed. But in the West, children start to experience the pressures of education as young as two-and-a-half or three, or even earlier – they do not know certain things, their parents are anxious that they should know them, their teachers are trying to get them to learn them. These pressures can create very early in life the seed of the great nervousness called sok-lung. This disorder involves a gradual mixing of a malignant wind with the subtle life-wind entering the heart chakra. This increasingly disturbs the mind and obstructs whatever the person is trying to do.

Doctors cannot detect this problem with instruments and tests, but most of the patients in the mental hospitals of the West are suffering from this disturbance of the life-wind. The emanations from their state of disharmony can cause even the doctors caring for them to become similarly afflicted. Since doctors cannot help us if we get sok-lung disorder, and in general any sort of lung is difficult to cure, we should try to practise Lam rim in such a way as to avoid its arising.

A sign of the beginning of sok-lung is that the mind becomes disturbed very easily; great fear can arise for no apparent external cause. For example, if one is meditating on compassion, thinking about the sufferings of others, one becomes very upset and starts to cry.

If air tends to well up in the lungs so that one spontaneously takes deep breaths and exhales deeply, the lung is getting stronger. One should try to relax. If one is tired, it is good to sleep.

If the sternum starts moving backwards and forwards, this is
a sign that the *lung* is quite heavy. The mind becomes very weak. Next, one becomes unable to speak with any strength, and one's bodily movements are also weak and unstable.

In general, an unhappy state of mind makes the arising of *lung* likely. When meditating on *lam rim*, we should try to keep the mind quiet and happy with what we are doing, then there is little probability of *lung* arising and every chance of success. It is important to start off with the right attitude, as a mistake at the beginning can carry all the way through, just like an error at the start of adding up a column of figures.

The first four types of *lung* should also be countered in their respective ways:

(a) Disturbance due to the karma of causing fear in and harm to others is to be dispelled by purification of one's bad karma.
(b) Disturbance by spirits is to be countered by appeasing the spirits with special offering ceremonies (pujjas).
(c) If physical disease (imbalance of the four elements) affects the mind, one should consult a doctor and take the necessary medicines.
(d) When mental disharmony has been caused by intense suffering, one should overcome the power of the mental suffering through the practice of Dharma. If one finds one cannot do this, then at least one should identify the causes about which one has been thinking too much and distract the mind away from them by engaging in something else; "playing" can be helpful.

There also exists a direct technique for overcoming *lung* by meditating on the movement of the subtle wind itself, but this is very difficult. In general, if one finds one has *lung*, one should relax and try to make the mind easy and more open; but it is no use just doing nothing, one should try to identify the problem and see how to overcome it.

We should understand the five types of *lung* and their remedies, and when we have *lung*, recognize its cause so that we can work on it correctly. Even if we do not get *lung* ourselves, knowing about it may enable us to talk helpfully to others who do.
Regardless of the qualities of the Lam rim, it can be of no use unless applied by the individual practitioner to his own mind. First of all, to know what to do, he must listen to teachings. Since one’s subsequent practice depends on this, it is most important to have from the beginning the correct method of listening to Dharma Teachings.

Two faults in particular can create a serious obstacle. The first is the attitude of “collecting” teachings – just listening in order to acquire information, more pieces of knowledge, much as one reads a newspaper, without the proper intention of applying it to one’s own practice. Having heard the teaching, one thinks “That’s it, I’ve heard it,” and does not want to hear it again but wants something new and “interesting”. In fact, one should listen to teachings again and again, not forgetting them but bearing them in mind, trying to remain aware of every point. Then if one hears the same teaching repeated later, there is still much benefit to be gained, since one’s way of looking at things may have changed a bit meanwhile. But the “collector” gains no immediate advantage from hearing a teaching again, merely a certain imprint on the mind.

The second fault is, though one intends to listen carefully to the Teachings, not understanding the benefits of doing so. Only with this understanding will one have the enthusiasm to overcome the difficulties; just as, for example, a man doing unpleasant work in a factory is kept going only by the thought of the money he is earning.

Therefore it is important to understand the benefits of listening to the Teachings. To explain them as in Lam rim chen mo would take a long time, but let us mention a few briefly.

(a) As any light overcomes darkness, so the function of listening is to gain the knowledge and wisdom that overcome the darkness of our mind. Hearing a teaching on any subject produces some understanding, which grows when one goes away and thinks about it, so that an area of one’s ignorance is dispelled.

(b) All external possessions can be lost, stolen, or destroyed,
but once a Dharma realization, acquired through listening to Teachings, has been integrated with the mind, no-one can take it away.

(c) Such understanding of Dharma is our best possible friend. Unlike ordinary friends, it never deserts us, whatever the situation, but is always available to help us find the best solution to any problem.

(d) If we go into retreat to meditate, unless we have listened to the Dharma there will be no possibility of the wisdoms of hearing, thinking and meditating arising.

(e) If we wish to help others, our talking to them can be of some use provided we have experience of the relevant point developed from the understanding derived from listening to the Dharma. But if we merely repeat words we have heard, without experience, then even though they are the same words as of a person who has had the experience, it will be of no direct benefit at all.

2 Threefold analogy of correct listening

A Sutra says:

Listen well, the best way, and hold it in your mind!12

(a) “Listen well”: just as an upside-down vessel will not receive whatever is poured on to it, so it is useless to sit in front of a Teacher if one is not listening well. Therefore instead of letting one’s mind wander all over the place, one must be like a vessel the right way up, listening intently to receive the Teaching.

(b) “Listen the best way”: a vessel that is dirty with refuse, filth, deposits of old food, or maybe even poison, is useless, as any water one pours into it will immediately become contaminated and unfit for drinking. Likewise, even if one listens hard to the Teaching, it will be no use if one has a wrong attitude such as trying to find faults with the other students, for the Teaching will be contaminated with one’s unwholesome frame of mind. Like a vessel that is not only the right way up but also clean inside, one must listen with pure motivation, feeling “I am a Dharma
practitioner, listening to these teachings in order to help my practice.”

(c) “Hold it in your mind”: a vessel may be upright and clean, but it is still no use if it leaks at the bottom. Similarly, if the teachings just go in one ear and out the other we cannot benefit from them. It is important to hold them in one’s mind, going over the points again and again until they are firmly integrated with it; in this way a very strong impression is left on the mind.

3 Further requirements of the student

Not only must the teacher of Dharma be unwaveringly truthful, the disciple also must be honest enough to recognise his own faults, so that he can use the teaching to eliminate them and develop good qualities. Otherwise, when shown by the teacher how to overcome some fault, he will simply react uselessly with anger. Often, looking into people’s faces as I teach, I can see just this anger arising. In addition, the student needs intelligence, and a genuine longing to receive the Dharma.

A story of a previous life of the Buddha [from the Jātakamālā of Ārya Śūra\(^\text{13}\)] illustrates these points.

Once the Bodhisattva was born as a prince called Sutasoma. [Now it happened that a certain king, Sudāsa, lost in the forest, had coupled with a lioness, who subsequently gave birth to a human child. This boy, though brought up by his father, inherited from his mother a taste for human flesh. Also, in exchange for their protection, he had promised to a group of piśāca demons, similarly inclined, a sacrifice of a hundred royal princes. So now he prowled the land in search of princes to eat or sacrifice.]

One day, this dreadful cannibal came to Sutasoma’s palace. [As his army and attendants scattered in terror,] Sutasoma calmly called out, “Hullo, here I am. Take me by all means, [do not bother those poor people]!” So the son of Sudāsa carried him back to his lair to cook and eat him.

But then, astonished at the Bodhisattva’s demeanour, his fearlessness in the face of death thanks to his complete lack of self-cherishing, the son of Sudāsa accepted his request to
return home for last farewells, after which the Bodhisattva promised to return. So Sutasoma went home, explained the situation to his father, and in fulfilment of his promise came back to the cannibal's lair, saying "Now I am back. You can eat me if you wish." The son of Sudāsa, amazed to see him return just to keep his word, questioned him. [The Bodhisattva explained the virtues of truthfulness, and how he had no reason to fear death, since all his life he had practised Generosity and avoided evil actions.] Greatly moved, the son of Sudāsa begged the Bodhisattva to teach him the Dharma, in these words:

Seeing the form of my evil conduct  
In your righteousness' clear mirror,  
Great longing is born within my mind,  
And I turn towards the Dharma.\(^{14}\)

[Thus the Bodhisattva saw that the son of Sudāsa was open-minded enough to admit his own faults and had the necessary desire for teachings.] But still he would not teach the Dharma straight away, but insisted on certain preparations:

Sitting on a lower seat  
In token of your humbled pride,  
Gaze with joyful eyes, as if  
Drinking the nectar of the Words!  

Devoutly and one-pointedly  
Incline your mind, serene and pure,  
And listen in reverence to the Dharma  
As a sick man to his doctor's words!\(^{15}\)

So the son of Sudāsa made a pile of wood to serve as a throne, and covered it with his upper garment as he had nothing else for a cushion. Then, seated on the throne with the son of Sudāsa at his feet, Sutasoma taught the Dharma and persuaded the cannibal to abandon killing and harming sentient beings [and the eating of human flesh, and also to release the other royal princes he was holding captive for sacrifice].

THE MANNER OF TEACHING

Just as those who listen to Dharma Teachings should consider
the benefits of doing so, the teacher in turn should reflect on the benefits of teaching the Dharma, so that he can teach tirelessly. A Sutra quoted in Lam rim chen mo lists twenty such benefits. Explaining the Dharma involves actions of mind, speech and body, all of which bring benefits.

The intention with which one teaches is very important. One must not teach wishing for people to admire one’s virtue and learning, or give one money, but with the thought of Great Compassion, wishing that all beings may be free of suffering.

Finally, the teaching itself must be unmistakable and presented intelligibly, with plenty of illustrations and analogies taken from everyday life. Never thinking that teaching the Dharma is hard work, the teacher smiles and delights in it untiringly, but takes care to teach only what is useful in leading towards Enlightenment.

AFTER THE TEACHING

If one receives a teaching and then meditates only on something else, little is gained. Definitely one should meditate on the new teachings one receives, but rather than drop one’s existing meditational practices, one should combine them with the new teachings.

To get to wherever one wants to go, one must keep to the path without being diverted: this applies to the Path of Dharma practice just as to ordinary paths.
The Preparatory Practices
The Preparatory Practices

Many people in the West wish to meditate, but in order to do so effectively, one needs an abundant store of merit so that one can easily surmount the obstacles that arise. *Lam rim* texts mention six preparatory practices that one should perform at the start of each session of meditation so as to accumulate merit:

1. Clean the room well and set up representations of the Body, Speech and Mind [of the Buddhas].
2. Seek offerings, without dissembling, and set them out in a beautiful arrangement.
3. Seated in a comfortable place, in cross-legged or half-cross-legged posture, with the body straight, take Refuge and generate *Bodhicitta*, successively and together.
4. Visualize clearly the field for the accumulation of merit.
5. Train the mind with the seven limbs that combine the points of accumulating merits and purifying obscurations.
6. Offer a mandala, and pray many times with strong desire for inspiration quickly to stop all perverse states of mind, produce all non-pervasive states of mind, and quell all external and internal hindrances.

[The first part of the text (verses 1 to 96) is designed to be recited with the last four of these practices.]
1 CLEAN THE ROOM WELL AND SET UP REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BODY, SPEECH AND MIND OF THE BUDDHAS

If one is going to meditate, or study a Dharma teaching, in one's own room, cleaning the room with the thought that it is a place of Dharma practice creates powerful merit. If one is going to meditate or receive teachings in a temple, even just visualizing it as a very clean place accumulates merit. Five advantages are given for this kind of practice:

(a) One’s own mind becomes pure and lucid.
(b) The minds of others entering the room become pure and lucid.
(c) In the future, one’s complexion will be bright.
(d) Beneficial spirits (belonging to the deva realm) will be attracted to the clean room and help to keep hindrances away.
(e) The seed is created for birth in a Pure Land, such as Tushita or Sukhāvatī.

The story is often told of a notoriously stupid disciple of the Buddha who attained Arhantship through this practice, but it must be remembered that the attitude with which it is carried out is all-important – cleaning simply as a chore will be of little benefit.

It is also very helpful to have in the meditation room representations of the Body, Speech and Mind of the Buddhas, in the form of pictures and statues, books of scriptures, and either a stūpa or a vajra and bell.

2 SET OUT OFFERINGS

It is good to put attractive offerings such as food, flowers, [lights and incense] in front of the images, with the motivation of gaining merit for the advancement of our practice. Various mistaken ways of offering should be avoided. It is pointless to set out offerings just to impress visitors and win praise, and of no value to offer unwanted things such as food that is going off; but it will be positively harmful to obtain things to offer by theft or deception, or to sacrifice animals. As
Shāntideva points out:

Someone whose body is being burned by fire
Will find no mental pleasure in sense-objects.
Just so, if one also harms sentient beings,
There is no way to please the Greatly
Compassionate. 19

The essential meaning of offering is to please the object of
offering, in this case the Buddhas, thus nothing that harms
sentient beings can ever be an offering to the Buddhas.
Conversely,

Also, what else can repay
The non-dissembling Friends, [the Buddhas,]
Who have helped immeasurably,
Apart from pleasing sentient beings? 20

We should therefore understand that offerings are not restricted
to material things that we put on the altar, but include the
“offering of practice”, all our practice of the Dharma, which
benefits sentient beings and so pleases the Buddhas.

3 SEATED IN THE MEDITATION POSTURE, TAKE
REFUGE AND GENERATE BODHICITTA

Some practices, such as meditating on the breath, are common
to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists, but taking Refuge in the
peculiarly Buddhist Objects of Refuge transforms one’s medita­
tion into an exclusively Buddhist practice. Its purpose is to
prevent one from falling away from the Path. Generating the
wish of Bodhicitta serves to maintain one in the highest Path,
that of a Bodhisattva, so that one does not fall into the lower
Paths of the Hearers and Pratyekas.

3a TAKING REFUGE
3a.1 Visualizing the Objects of Refuge

Sitting in meditation, we should build up the visualization of
the Objects of Refuge. If we can, it is best to do this as described
in the text (verses 1 to 8); however, as this demands consider­
able skill in visualization, an easier alternative will also be given.
[1] First we visualize many offerings around us, such as
flowers fit for gods. In the centre of them, we visualize eight lions supporting a four-sided throne, two on each side, with their front paws. The lions symbolize eight powers of the Buddha, and the four sides of the throne the four Means of Attraction – Buddhas and Bodhisattvas attract disciples and lead them along the Path by giving, pleasant speech, helping them with beneficial explanations of the Dharma, and becoming living examples of their own teaching.

On the throne, which is of precious materials, are a large white lotus, a sun disc, and a moon disc, representing in turn the Buddha’s renunciation, understanding of Emptiness, and Bodhicitta.

[2] On these we visualize Shakyamuni Buddha, indivisible from our own root Guru, his body shining and endowed with the thirty-two major Marks and eighty minor Signs of a Great Being. [3] There are many postures in which the Buddha can sit, each with its particular significance, but here he is sitting with his legs crossed in the vajra position, his right hand touching the earth, and his left in his lap holding a begging-bowl full of amṛita, or nectar. The gesture of touching the earth (bhūmi-sparsa-mudrā) symbolizes that he has overcome the four Māras – Death, defilements, the aggregates, and the Son-of-gods Māra (Deva-putra-māra) – which obstruct the practice of Dharma, in both their coarse and their subtle aspects. It is this last detail that distinguishes him from the Hearer and Pratyeka Arhants, who have overcome only the coarse aspects of the four Māras. One explanation of the Buddha’s title, Bhagavan, relates it to this overcoming of the Māras. The left hand in the gesture of contemplation (dhyāna-mudrā) indicates that he is always absorbed in direct meditation on Emptiness, while the bowl, full of four different types of amṛita, indicates his action of explaining the Dharma to sentient beings. Their juxtaposition means that the Buddha engages in both these things at once, unlike any non-Buddha, who may be able to do them separately, but never together. The four types of amṛita, coloured white, red, yellow and blue, are associated with the four classes of Buddha-activity – pacifying, increasing, subjugating and fierce activities.

From the Buddha’s body there radiates light, which looks
like a web. [4] He is called “matchless” since no non-Buddha can match him, although of course other Buddhas have the same qualities and powers.

Now we visualize light coming from Shākyamuni’s heart and going off to his right. On it appear the Buddha Maitreya and a group of Gurus of the lineage stemming from him, who taught especially the Method side of the practice. More light emanates from Shākyamuni’s heart and goes off to his left, and on it appear Mañjuśrī and the Gurus of the Wisdom lineage. A third mass of light from Shākyamuni’s heart goes behind him (upwards in a two-dimensional picture), producing the Gurus of the lineage that combines the teachings of Method and Wisdom. The Buddha dominates this assembly as the moon dominates the star-filled sky on a clear night.

[5] Again light comes from Buddha Shākyamuni’s heart, and spreads out downwards. On it appear many tiers of beings who help other Dharma practitioners – the Yidams, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the Hearer and Pratyeka Arhants, the Heroes (śūra) and Dākinīs, and the Dharma-protectors. While the text describes these as “surrounding” (mtha’ skor) Shākyamuni and the three groups of Gurus, actually it seems to mean simply spread out below them.

Visualizing the Gurus and other beings as arising in this way, from light produced from Shākyamuni’s heart, helps us to remember that they are not a crowd of quite separate people, but are all of the same nature as Buddha Shākyamuni, whom we are already visualizing as of one nature with our own root Guru. Thus all the beings in this visualization are of the nature of our own Guru. However, if we find the generation from light too difficult, we can omit it and just visualize the secondary figures directly in their final position.

[6] Beside each of the Gurus we now visualize books, expressing what they taught – texts on Bodhicitta for the Method lineage, on the Wisdom realizing Emptiness for the Wisdom lineage, plus of course whatever texts each Guru actually wrote.

[7] These Gurus are not just idly sitting there, but are constantly active in helping sentient beings. They do this by sending out to every realm in which sentient beings exist rays of
very brilliant light, which emit emanations of themselves.

[8] We should also visualize each of these beings in whom we are taking Refuge as looking at us with much love and compassion, very happy and pleased to help us. This helps to establish an auspicious condition which will enable us actually to please our own Guru.

3a.2 Simplified visualization

Many Western students are likely to find the complete visualization as described above too complicated. In this case, it is sufficient simply to visualize the central figure, Shākyamuni Buddha, who is of the same nature as one's root Guru. This image is then called the Comprehensive Body (sanggrahakāya), since it includes the attributes of all the various Gurus, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and so on.

3a.3 Producing the thought seeking Refuge

[9] It is good if we can visualize around ourselves countless suffering sentient beings of all sorts, either in their actual forms as animals, hell-beings, etc., or all in human shape. This is because it is better to take Refuge on behalf of all sentient beings rather than just for ourselves. However, we are the main person seeking Refuge.

[10] When we go to a lawyer for help, we have to explain to him all the details of our problem. In the same way, now that we are seeking the aid of the Buddhas, we explain our problem to them, that for an inconceivably long time we have been experiencing every possible sort of suffering over and over again and have never found a chance to escape.

[11] Next we think to ourselves that now at last, for the first time, we have this chance to leave suffering behind – the opportune, fortunate rebirth. We have found the perfect Refuge, the Buddha and his excellent Teaching, which can release all sentient beings from their sufferings. We must look within our minds to confirm that this is so, that we really have made contact with the Buddha’s Teaching – this is not something we can check by looking outwardly, like whether or not we have come into contact with dirt.
We should also think that since beginningless time, defilements (kleśa) such as greed, hate and delusion have occupied a stronghold in our mind, causing us endless hardship, and we still have not managed to overcome them. But our present situation gives us the chance to do so. We can look in our minds and see whether we now have the hope of freeing ourselves of defilements.

[12] Now we should concentrate on the fact that we have no idea at all when we are going to die. It might be in a few years, or in a few weeks, or even today. I am older than any of the students listening to this teaching, but it is not certain that I shall be the first to die – unfortunately, it is quite possible for people to die young, without having had time to study or develop their practice of the Dharma.

Having recognised strongly this uncertainty, we should consider how little control we shall have over our destiny when we do come to die. Even now, we do not get everything we want, and if we die without having accumulated strong roots of virtue in this life, it will be no use at all saying we would rather take a happy rebirth. If we spend this human life mainly in accumulating more negative actions, we are sure to be reborn in one of the realms of woe – in hell, the preta realm, or the animal realm. If this happens, it is no trivial matter. The sufferings of these states are so great that they are hard to bear even for a short time. We know of many examples of cruel punishments, torture and brutality that people inflict on other human beings, and of horrifying accidents. If these things happen just in the human realm, whatever will it be like in hell? Now we find it unpleasant just to go for one day without food or heating – how much worse will it be to take birth as a preta? Even as human beings we can find it very difficult to understand one page of a Dharma book, but if we become animals, we shall have no chance of understanding anything.

Such a rebirth depends on how we live now. Are we using this life to prepare to go to the realms of woe? If we do not want to go there, we must start right away preparing to go the other way.

With this motivation, we take Refuge in the Objects of Refuge we have visualized. But we should continue the con-
The Essential Nectar

templation, thinking [13] that although we are at present in one of the happier states of birth, as human beings, we know from our own experience that we still have to endure many sufferings, both the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death, common to everyone, and many other sufferings, great and small, which we have to go through again and again. Besides, if we are using this opportunity as human beings to accumulate as many good actions as we can, that is all very well, but far more likely we engage sometimes in actions which can result in happy rebirth, and sometimes in the opposite sort. In this case, we see that our human state is unstable, like a boat that can carry a non-swimmer across water but can also leave him helpless if it should be overturned by some monstrous creature on the way. It allows the possibility of progress, but no guarantee.

[14] While recognizing the instability of our present situation, we must also recognize its value as a basis for practising the Dharma. We should see how this value is enhanced by the availability of teachers who can guide our practice and point out what to do at each step – especially if we have found one. Then we should try to recognize the defects of samsaric existence and the advantages of liberation from it. As we learn to discriminate the real nature of samsara, we see that virtually every samsaric situation is one of great suffering. Since any situation that can cause us suffering tends to arouse fear, there will grow in us a genuine fear of samsara, impelling us to seek Liberation.

[15] This contemplation has further developed our thought seeking Refuge, but still we have not reached the supreme thought of Refuge, that of the Mahāyāna. We must go on to consider that seeking Liberation just for ourself, without thinking of the welfare of others, will only increase our self-centredness. Instead, we should seek Refuge for the sake of all sentient beings.

The text suggests we should develop compassion towards other sentient beings through thinking that there is no being who has not at some time been one’s father, and at some other time one’s mother, then developing the wish to repay the kindness they gave us on those occasions. But for Westerners, though some can use it, this method often seems to be more of
a hindrance than a help. It is best simply to consider our own situation and see that our state of self-centredness is counter-productive and actually harms us; then to develop joy in the happiness of other sentient beings, wishing to help them in any way we can.

[16] Who is there really able to accomplish this task of releasing ourself and all sentient beings from samsaric existence, and leading us towards complete Awakening? However hard we look, we shall find no effective Refuge other than the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

At this point, firm faith in the efficacy of the Buddha is of great value. For those who have such faith, reciting this verse will help to develop their minds and increase their wish for Liberation. Those who do not, who are doubtful whether or not the Buddha can help, may see in it no more than a narrow-minded, sectarian assertion of the superiority of Buddhism over other religions, and it will only increase their confusion and doubt.

If we are interested in developing a genuine practice of the Dharma, we must study widely, so that when any sort of confusion or doubt arises, we can identify the precise nature of the problem and apply the specific remedy. In the present case, it is important to study the many reasons why the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are considered to be the only final Refuge. The better we understand these reasons, the stronger will be our faith, and the more effective this verse.

3a.4 Actual taking of Refuge

[17] Now we should think with great determination and fervour that we are going to go for Refuge to the Three Jewels for the present life and always until we have accomplished Perfect Buddhahood. As we recite the lines, we develop the attitude taking Refuge in the Gurus, the root of all virtue, the Buddhas who teach, the holy Dharma, and the Sangha of Ārya beings. To diminish our self-centredness, we should visualize all sentient beings around us also taking Refuge, in the same words. If we find it awkward to imagine human speech coming from cows and sheep, for example, then as stated above we can visualize all the sentient beings in human form. Even taking
Refuge for oneself alone accumulates vast merit; if one takes Refuge for the sake of all sentient beings then the merit is multiplied accordingly.

The verse is written only once, but it is good to repeat it many times, improving one's visualization and intensifying the thought of Refuge each time.

[18] When we recite the Refuge formula, we should visualize coming from the bodies of all the Gurus, Buddhas and other Objects of Refuge before us a rain of white light and amrita, which enters equally the bodies of ourself and all the sentient beings surrounding us, and also their minds, purifying all faults of body and mind. First all physical sickness disappears, then all external and internal hindrances, then all interferences to a long life.

[19] The rain of light and amrita also purifies the many negativities we have accumulated through thoughts, speech and physical actions that were disrespectful to the Three Jewels of Refuge, especially during previous lives when we had not yet understood their qualities. In addition, we visualize that it increases our life and merits and our qualities of understanding of scripture and realizations, and purifies all manner of obstacles. We should feel now that the Objects of Refuge have accepted us, ourselves and all sentient beings, and taken us under their protection.

Taking Refuge in the way described above is an exceedingly powerful practice. If we can do it with real strength of mind, we can accumulate even more merit than by the practice of “Giving away and Taking over” (gTong len) (see verses 347–348). This is because not only are we considering the welfare of all sentient beings and visualizing them around us, but we are visualizing the Objects of Refuge, the Buddhas, Gurus, Bodhisattvas and other high beings in front of us. The power depends on the state of mind and the visualization – it does not matter whether we recite the Refuge formula of verse seventeen or a different one such as Namo guruḥyaḥ... [or Buddham śaranam gacchami ...].

As already pointed out, to perform this practice requires faith. For those who lack firm conviction about the existence of past and future lives and the supreme ability of the Buddha,
Dharma and Sangha to help, this teaching is not much use. But if we do have such conviction, then in accordance with its strength, the benefit is immense. It is said that were the merit accruing from the practice of taking Refuge to have form, the whole world would not be big enough to contain it.

To have a large store of merit is very important for effective practice. Someone of great merit will experience little suffering and much happiness, and his wishes will be easily fulfilled; he will readily overcome whatever difficulties he meets, whether in Dharma practice or in worldly tasks. But with an inadequate accumulation of merit, even if one develops faith in the Three Jewels and takes Refuge, one may later fall away from this Refuge; or one may find one's practice obstructed by sickness, premature death, and other problems.

Therefore Tibetans, when they face obstacles of any kind, seek to increase their merit by such practices as prostrations and reciting mantras.

The visualization of light and amṛita, which also plays an important role in Tantric sādhanas, is of great significance. Amṛita is a Sanskrit word composed of the negative prefix a­ and mrita, “death”, thus it means “overcoming death”. Its Tibetan equivalent bdud rtsi is likewise in two parts, bdud meaning “Māra” and rtsi indicating a medicine for overcoming them. Thus the main function of amṛita is overcoming the obstructions that are personified as the four Māras, including Death. In combination with light, amṛita represents the Method aspect of the Path, while the light concerns the Wisdom aspect. In the higher Tantras, further levels of significance are taught.

3b GENERATING BODHICITTA

[20] This section begins with the contemplation of one’s own situation, bound in the prison of samsara by the bonds of karma and defilements, and suffering continually. We can see from our own experience that defilements are present in our mind, that we keep creating new actions, and that we are suffering.

Now we apply our experience of our own condition to others. As at verse fifteen, the text mentions all sentient beings as having been one’s mother; but again, it is probably easier simply to look at one’s own suffering and realize that just as one
helps oneself, one should be trying to help others. The mother-child relationship is singled out because this is the closest relationship between people in worldly life. Until the child is able to look after itself, the mother is completely responsible for every aspect of its existence. Not only human mothers but mother birds, monkeys and other animals take great care of their young. And it is not just a matter of one lifetime, but every time we have taken birth as a human being, a monkey, a little bird, or one of countless other sorts of animals, our mother in that existence looked after us carefully until we were independent.

[21] When we were completely helpless, we depended totally on our mother to do everything for us. Now we must see that the situation is reversed: the sentient beings who have been our mother are in trouble and need help, so just as they gave us help when we needed it, so it is our responsibility to give them help now. Of course, if we do not understand the existence of previous lives, it is hard for this contemplation to have much effect on the mind.

But at present, we are hardly in a position to lead all mother sentient beings out of the problems of samsaric existence, when we cannot yet lead ourselves out or even see where we are going to go when we die. We have no way of predicting our future destiny, and to liberate oneself from suffering is extremely difficult.

[22] Even Hearer and Pratyeka Arhants, who have accomplished part of the Path, still have obscurations, which must be abandoned before they can attain full Enlightenment. Therefore, the best thing we can do to help all sentient beings is to attain Buddhahood ourselves. [23] In that state, one has both eliminated all one’s own faults and obscurations, and developed all the qualities that enable one to benefit others. In our present state, we can accomplish a very limited amount, and that with great difficulty. But a Buddha’s actions are both effortless and of maximum effectiveness.

[24] We therefore develop the resolve to attain perfect Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings; and not content with this thought, we prepare actually to engage in the conduct that leads to the accomplishment of Buddhahood, namely the
six Perfections of Giving, Morality, Patience, Energy, Concentration and Wisdom. It is no use thinking “That is very difficult, I can’t really do it”: we should develop strong self-confidence and become determined to act in this way.

Bodhicitta is a state of mind that firstly is concerned to accomplish the welfare of all sentient beings, and secondly, seeing that this is possible only on the attainment of Buddhahood, is determined to attain Buddhahood. This promise to attain Buddhahood we now make to the Gurus, Buddhas and other Objects of Refuge whom we are still visualizing in front of us.

[25] When we make this promise, we visualize that Buddha Shakyamuni in the centre of the visualization is extremely pleased, and sends out an exact duplicate of himself. This emanation, of the nature of light like all the rest of the visualization, comes to the top of our head and merges into our own body. [26] At that very moment, all our obscurations are dispelled, and our body also becomes a body of Buddha Shakyamuni, identical to the one in front of us, of the nature of light, and emitting countless rays of light. We should visualize that these light-rays go out and touch all the places where sentient beings live, transforming them into Pure Lands of deities. They also touch all sentient beings, whom we are still visualizing around us, instantly purifying their obscurations, and transforming their bodies into the form of Shakyamuni, still of the nature of light.

Thus visualizing ourself and all sentient beings around us as being Shakyamuni, we should contemplate all this work we have accomplished, and rejoice in it, thinking it is excellent. At this point we should remain in meditation, maintaining this thought for as long as possible.

This is an extremely powerful method, called “developing Bodhicitta by taking the result”, because we visualize the result, our own Buddhahood and that of all sentient beings, in order to develop the state of mind.

3c THE FOUR IMMEASURABLES

When we come out of this concentration, we should realize that it was only a visualization, and in fact all sentient beings have
not yet been liberated from suffering. So we go on to increase the power of the Bodhicitta we have just generated by developing the four Immeasurable thoughts.

[27] First is the measureless thought of Equanimity. Every sentient being has experienced every possible relationship – father and son, brother and sister, etc. – many times with every other. But not recognizing this fact, they feel attachment towards some and aversion towards others. Out of this arise all sorts of fighting and disputes, and an incredible amount of suffering. We do not see the past relationships, but we do see the attachment and hatred and the suffering.

[28] Considering this, we develop Immeasurable Equanimity in a sequence of four thoughts.

(a) Desiring: “How wonderful it would be if I and all sentient beings could abandon all attachment and aversion towards each other, all thought of some being close and others distant, and see everyone equally!”

(b) Wishing: “May we all indeed come to see everyone equally!”

(c) Superior intention: taking the responsibility upon oneself, “I shall bring it about that we do all come to see everyone equally.”

(d) Requesting: realizing that we do not yet have the power to carry out this resolve, we ask the Gurus and Buddhas visualized before us to inspire us with that power.

[29] We develop Immeasurable Loving-kindness through thinking that the best way sentient beings could exist would be in a state of happiness, and reflecting as the verse indicates. It is plain to see that many people continually accumulate more and more negative actions, unaware that to attain happiness they must avoid non-virtue; and that there are some who still engage in non-virtue even though they do know this. [30] The four thoughts of desiring, wishing, superior intention and requesting are developed, as with Equanimity.

[31–34] Then Immeasurable Compassion, and finally Immeasurable Joy are developed, again with the same series of four thoughts. The text is clear enough.

Many of us perform daily practices which begin with the three
items just explained, taking Refuge, generating Bodhicitta, and the four Immeasurables. If we think about them every day and go through the contemplations described, the benefits are extremely great. If we just recite the words without thinking, the benefits will be far less.

3d SPECIAL GENERATION OF BODHICITTA

[35] Considering the suffering of sentient beings, and their kindness, we develop the strong determination to attain Buddhahood as quickly as possible, in order to be able to help them immediately. It is the emphasis on speed that distinguishes this from the generation of Bodhicitta [in 3b]. “Quickly, quickly” implies in this very lifetime, and even in the shortest possible period of three years and three months.

Like a machine that can do a great deal of work in a short time, the power of Bodhicitta enables one to accumulate in a short time the immense merits necessary to attain Buddhahood.

4 VISUALIZE CLEARLY THE FIELD FOR THE ACCUMULATION OF MERIT

The present text suggests that we maintain the same visualization of the field of Gurus, Buddhas etc. that we used for taking Refuge and generating Bodhicitta. [This heading has therefore already been dealt with under 3a.] We should imagine that it includes all Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Hearer and Pratyeka Arhants, and other Arya beings who help us in our practice of Dharma.

5 TRAIN THE MIND WITH THE SEVEN LIMBS
5a BATH OFFERING

Here the text inserts an additional practice, the offering of a bath, which is not essential but is something we can do in order to accumulate more merit.

[36–37] We address all the Objects of Accumulating Merit, saying, “Please listen to me! I wish to attain Bodhicitta and Enlightenment, but for this I need much merit. So please come here so that I can accumulate great merit by bathing your
bodies!" And by their magical powers, they descend before us.

[38] Now we visualize a large bath, not like an ordinary swimming-pool with ordinary water, but very beautiful and built of precious materials, as detailed in the text, and full of amrita water. [39] When Shākyamuni Buddha was born from the right side of his Mother, the gods Shakra and Brahma appeared and offered him a bath like this.

[40] Since the bodies of Buddhas and Arhants are already completely pure and cannot become dirty, it is clear that the purpose of offering them this bath is not to clean them. Rather, we are going through the actions of washing them for the sake of our own accumulation of merit, so that we can attain the state where we are able to purify the body, speech and mind of all sentient beings of their defilements and other obscurations. It is the same as when we set out food and the like on the altar as offerings to say, Tārā – we do not do this because Tārā is hungry and needs something to eat, but in order to accumulate merit for ourselves.

[41] We visualize going out from our hearts innumerable goddesses, who are to perform all the actions of washing and so forth. They are of many different sorts and colours – red, yellow, blue, green, white and multi-coloured. Some hold precious vases of special water for washing, some towels of heavenly cloth for drying the bodies, some perfume for anointing the bodies, some beautiful clothes to be offered afterwards, and so on. They go out from our heart and perform their tasks, then come back and reabsorb into our heart.

While some goddesses bathe the Buddhas with excellent water from their vases, [others] sing and play beautiful music, all of which is part of our offering.

We may find certain problems with the visualization at this stage, since the Objects of Offering include all the Tantric deities, in particular the fierce deities such as Yamāntaka, who have flames streaming from their bodies – one may wonder what happens when one tries washing them. However, we should not think that the flames are real fire. Actually they are intense light, depicted as fire so as to symbolize the Wisdom-knowledge of the Buddhas, which consumes all the obscurations previously existing in the mind-stream as fire consumes
wood. All deities should be visualized as having light coming from their bodies, but in the case of fierce deities it is usually shown as flames to enhance their fierce aspect.

It may also seem very tricky to wash deities who have many arms and legs, and even heads. If so, we should remember that each deity appears in different aspects, according to the situation. Yamantaka, for example, is said to have forty-nine different aspects – he does not always have nine heads, thirty-four arms and sixteen legs. In fact, he is not even always fierce, for he is the same person as Manjushri. Je Tsongkhapa also is another aspect in which Manjushri-Yamantaka has appeared. Avalokiteshvara, again, appears sometimes, for specific reasons, with eleven heads and a thousand arms; but at other times he appears differently. The commonly-depicted aspect of Tara is only one of many ways in which she has revealed herself to meditators, and has particular meanings – the right hand extended in the gesture of granting boons invites all who wish for happiness to come to her, the left hand in the gesture of the Three Jewels means “Do not be frightened, you can find complete Refuge here!” , and the flowers whose stems she is holding symbolize that one should not be attached to samsaric happiness, but seek Liberation. 

Thus if we find it hard to visualize the washing of the deities in complicated aspects, we can and should visualize them in simpler aspects, so that we can do this practice well.

We should also be aware that the bodies of the Objects of Offering are not of flesh and blood, but made entirely of light.

[42] Bathing the Buddhas etc. with the best possible materials, we ask them to inspire us to accomplish whatever we need to accomplish, and to grant us all the merits we require.

[43] After washing the bodies, we have to dry them. We should visualize that all the water collects into five spots – on the head, on each shoulder, at the heart, and at the navel – leaving the rest of the body completely dry. All that the goddesses with the towels have to do, therefore, is press the towel on each of these spots in turn. They do this to the accompaniment of the five mantric syllables, Oṃ Hūṃ Trām Hṛṣī Ṭhī.

[44] Now we visualize more goddesses coming forward
and offering clothes – not ordinary, gross clothing such as we wear, but of a very light, rainbow nature. To the beings who manifest in the form of monks they offer monks’ robes, to those in the form of gods, clothes of gods, and so on.

[45] Since it is not fitting for monks to wear ornaments, the offering of ornaments is made only to the beings not manifesting as monks. Buddha Shākyamuni’s only ornament is his begging bowl! To those in the aspect of gods and lay people, the offering goddesses from our heart present all suitable kinds of ornaments, such as diadems, necklaces and bracelets. We say that although the Buddhas are already completely adorned with the thirty-two Marks and eighty Signs of a Great Being, and so need no external ornament, we are offering ornaments to them in order to gain the merit to become Buddhas ourselves.

[46] [47] Finally, [having reabsorbed all the offering goddesses into our heart,] we ask the beings to take their places again and remain there while we offer them the seven-limb puja.

5b  *THE SEVEN LIMBS*

5b.1  *Prostration*

There is prostration of body, of speech, and of mind. Prostration of speech includes praising and speaking respectfully of the Object of prostration, that of mind is a respectful attitude of mind, and that of the body is deferential physical actions, not necessarily standing and making a formal prostration, but perhaps putting the hands together at the heart.

For prostration to be complete, it should be done with awareness of the true nature of the object being prostrated to, the person prostrating, and the action of prostrating.

Those who wish to do prostrations as a special practice, such as the hundred thousand prostrations, should obtain clear teachings on how it is to be done, so that they understand all the details.

[48] Here we prostrate first to the King of Sages, Shākyamuni Buddha, and next [49] to the Gurus, who teach the miserable beings in samsara the way to Liberation.

[50] Thirdly, we prostrate to the Yidams, the tutelary deities who, if followed in pure Tantric practice, can grant all realiz-
The Preparatory Practices

A Yidam is not necessarily fierce. For example, the Yidams of the Kadampa tradition were Ārya-Ṭārā and Avalokiteśvara; it depends on one’s personal inclination.

It is essential that we see clearly that Guru, Buddha and Yidam are of one nature. In illustration of this, an incident from the life of Marpa is frequently recounted. Once, when travelling in search of his Guru, Naropa, Marpa had seen in the sky the Yidam Hevajra with his attendant goddesses; on this occasion he recognized them instantly as a manifestation of his Guru. But later, when he had found Naropa and was living with him and receiving teachings, Naropa woke him up from sleep one day, showed him again the mandala of Hevajra in the sky, and asked, “Will you prostrate first to me or to the Yidam?” This time, Marpa thought it was a much rarer thing to see the Yidam than his Guru, so chose the Yidam. Naropa told him, “Without the Guru, the Yidam does not exist for a moment. All the countless Buddhas arise only in dependence on the Guru.” And the mandala dissolved into Naropa’s heart.

In consequence of this blunder of Marpa’s, Naropa prophesied that his family line would soon become extinct, which came about when his only son died young.

Therefore we must bear in mind in yidam-practice that Guru, Yidam and Buddha are inseparable. Otherwise, we shall be unable to accumulate merit as we should. This does not mean that anyone who is a guru is necessarily a Buddha—he may be a Bodhisattva, an Arhant, or an ordinary being—but to practise Guru-yoga and Lam rim properly we have to learn to see him in this way.

Having prostrated to the Buddhas, we prostrate to the Dharma Refuge, visualized in the form of books, of the nature of light, as described in verse six. Then, moving down the tiers of figures, we prostrate to the Bodhisattvas, the Pratyeka and Hearer Arhants, and the Heroes and Dākinīs. The latter are male and female emanations of the Buddhas, who take birth in different situations all over the world and help those who wish to practise Dharma. Then come the Dharma Protectors, who are always available to prevent the arising of obstacles and hindrances to Dharma practice and to destroy those which do arise. Finally we...
prostrate to the entire assembly of beings with good qualities.

If we find it hard to visualize so many different aspects of the Buddhas and make prostrations to them, then as before, with Refuge, we can simply visualize the figure of Buddha Shākyamuni, feeling that he has the nature of all of them – the Comprehensive Body.

Prostration serves to purify negativities of the body, speech and mind. In particular, it is the direct opponent of pride. Clearly, pride tends to make one avoid any sort of deference to others. It is important to overcome pride as it directly prevents the accumulation of merits.

5b.2 Offering

The offerings we make begin [58–61] with eight standard types of offering, in order: water for rinsing the mouth, water for washing the feet, flowers, incense, lights, perfumed water for anointing the body, food, and music. Then [62] we make offerings to the five senses.

Detailed commentary is unnecessary. We should visualize very beautiful offerings, as described in the verses. Ideally they should be of the nature of things from the realms of the gods, but since we do not really know what those are like, we should just make them as pure and as wonderful as we can imagine.

The general purpose of offering is to accumulate merit. Its particular function is to be the direct opponent to avarice.

5b.3 Confession of sins

[66] We should think that all the suffering we have experienced in the past, are experiencing now, and are to experience in the future, is caused by the negativities in our own continuum. We have not accumulated these negativities in this life alone, but in many previous lives.

Then from the depths of our heart we should generate the feeling of regret towards this, and ask the beings in the Field of Merit before us, “We confess all this – please help us to purify it!”
Evidently the main purpose of confession is to purify our accumulated negativities of body, speech and mind. In particular, it acts as a direct antidote to all defilements, such as greed and hatred.

5b.4 *Rejoicing*

[67] We think of all the good works of all beings – Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, *Aryas,* and ordinary beings of all sorts – and rejoice in them from our heart, trying to share in this virtue. This practice is the best way to accumulate great stores of merit with very little effort. In particular, it is the direct opponent of jealousy, one of the worst negative emotions. Jealousy is the state of mind that feels unhappy on seeing the good qualities and happiness of others, while rejoicing is precisely the opposite, feeling happy about others’ happiness and virtues.

5b.5 *Requesting the turning of the Wheel of Dharma*

[68] We ask the Buddhas [and their emanations] to continue spreading the teachings of Method and Wisdom. Through this, we acquire much merit. In particular, it acts as a direct opponent to the negativities that we have accumulated with regard to the Dharma, as for example by criticizing it in previous lives.

5b.6 *Asking the Gurus to remain*

[69] We ask the Gurus and Buddhas to remain in this world, not passing into Nirvana but continuing to help sentient beings overcome suffering as long as there are any left. This is the best way to increase the life of one’s Guru, and one’s own life. In particular, it is the direct opponent to negativities accumulated with regard to our Gurus, in this and previous lives.

5b.7 *Dedication*

[70] Finally, we imagine collected together all the virtues we
have accumulated, and also those of all sentient beings, and dedicate them to [our Enlightenment for] the benefit of all sentient beings.

This protects the power of our virtue from destruction by anger. In particular, it is a direct opponent to the mental karma of wrong views, such as denial of rebirth and the laws of karma. Even if we do not hold such wrong views now, we have indulged in them in previous lives.

The seven limbs are extremely important. They include all the causes and conditions needed to accomplish the two essential aspects of Dharma practice, purifying faults and accumulating merits and positive qualities. The limbs of Prostration and Confession are ways of purifying negativities, and the other limbs, except Dedication, are ways of developing the positive. Dedication increases and stabilizes this merit.

6 OFFER A MANDALA, AND PRAY FOR INSPIRATION
6a THE MANDALA OFFERING

The Sanskrit word *manḍala* has been translated into Tibetan as *snying po len pa*, "taking the essence", implying that it is a good way to make this human life very meaningful, by eliminating the causes of suffering and accumulating the causes of happiness.

When offering the mandala, one first of all takes in the left hand the plate one is using as a base and rubs it three times clockwise with the right forearm. One thinks of the arm as being of the nature of the three principal points of the Path – Renunciation, *Bodhicitta*, and the understanding of Emptiness – and of the plate as being one's own mind. Rubbing it three times signifies purifying the mind of all the negative impressions accumulated from actions of the mind, speech and body, and all obscurations and stains.

Then one puts a little rice on the mandala base and goes round three times anticlockwise with the right arm. This symbolizes receiving blessings of body, speech and mind from the Field of Merit visualized in front of one.

Next one makes the visualization, while reciting and putting on the rice. If one can, it is good to recite the list of offerings –
the world-system of Mount Meru with the four continents and
eight sub-continents, the seven precious things and so forth. If
not, it is sufficient simply to visualize many marvellous offer-
ings, thinking of them in the fourfold manner to be described
below.

At the end, the rice can be tipped off the base either away
from or towards oneself. The first means that one is making
offering externally in order to accumulate virtue within oneself,
the second that one is receiving the pleasure of the beings in the
Field of Merit produced by one's offering to them.

The physical objects that we use in the mandala offering,
such as the plate and the rice, are not really the mandala. They
are only a support for visualization, on the basis of which we
should offer mentally four kinds of mandala simultaneously –
the outer, inner, secret and Suchness mandalas.

(a) Offering the outer mandala means offering a pleasing
external environment, [i.e. a visualization of the uni-
verse, filled with all manner of precious things.]

(b) One offers the inner mandala by thinking that that visual-
ization is of the nature of one's virtues of the past, present
and future.

(c) Offering the secret mandala involves thinking that this
virtue one is offering has the nature of all happiness and
bliss.

(d) To offer the Suchness mandala, one must understand the
ultimate nature of this offering, its Emptiness of true
existence.

There is also a manner of offering the mandala related to the
practice of the six Perfections.

This explanation is not sufficient for doing the practice of a
hundred thousand mandala offerings. Those who wish to do
this should request a special teaching. Some details are best
taught by practical demonstration.

6b PRAYERS FOR INSPIRATION

[First [71–78] we call upon our Root Guru and the Gurus of
the various lineages in turn, then [79–96] we make specific
requests for their inspiration in the successive stages of prac­tice. In effect, the rest of the text serves as commentary on this section.]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We are exceedingly fortunate in our present situation, so rich in opportunity. We must realize how fortunate we are, and put this opportunity to good use by accumulating a great deal of merit. If we lack merit, there are many obstructions that can arise. Hindrances to the body, such as sickness, prevent us from taking advantage of the human state; hindrances to the lifespan cut short our life. But worse than these are hindrances affecting the mind, which can lead us astray from the Dharma Path with the result that for extremely long periods we do not meet it again. Therefore we should increase our stock of merit to help us overcome all such hindrances and make the going easier on the Path. The best method to accumulate merit is through the practices described above – Refuge, Bodhicitta, the Four Immeasurables, the Seven Limbs, the Mandala Offering and the rest.

However, it is difficult for these methods to give rise to a proper accumulation of merit if our mind is filled with anxiety. I, for example, am sixty-two years of age, which is quite old for a Tibetan, and sometimes experience anxiety about this, but much of this anxiety is quite useless. So we should try to keep our minds relaxed and happy, and further our practice by study and meditation in this state.
The Actual Practice

Part One
Basics
Meditation 1
Guru Devotion

1a.1 THE ADVANTAGES OF DEVOTION AND DISADVANTAGES OF NON-DEVOTION

If we understand well the advantages of devotion to the Guru, we can develop the right attitude and practise it properly; if we do not, the practice will not be very fruitful. The same applies in worldly activities such as working in a factory or farming - to do the job properly one needs to know what sort of return one can expect from it.

[97] If one has a Master, or Spiritual Friend, who is able to teach correctly the entire Path to full Enlightenment, and devotes oneself to him properly, the advantages are too numerous to mention.

[98] The benefit of engaging in difficult ascetic practices for vast periods of time is less than that of reliance on the Spiritual Friend for a short time, because of the great kindness of the Spiritual Friend.

[99] If a mother sees her child is intelligent and assiduous and doing well in his studies, she is pleased because she predicts that he will be successful later on. In the same way, when the Buddhas see someone devoting himself correctly to his Spiritual Friend, they are very glad, because they know this person will be able to make much progress on the spiritual Path.
If one has the correct attitude towards the Spiritual Friend, then even though one is not deliberately inviting the Buddhas before one, they enter the Teacher so that one receives their inspiration or blessing through him. Offering him even one apple will then accumulate as much merit as offering it to all the Buddhas.

Much as a gutter collects all the rain that falls on a roof, faith in one's Spiritual Friend serves to collect all the rain of blessings or inspiration. Through proper devotion, all hindrances, external and internal, to the practice are overcome, and all the successive realizations are easily accomplished. For example, Sakya Pandita and Milarepa were so successful in their practice because of their intense devotion to their Gurus, as will be described later (verse 137), and Atisha’s cook also achieved exceptional realizations similarly.

If one maintains the right attitude of respect and devotion towards one’s Guru, then out of the wish to please him one will feel strongly that one should not think bad thoughts or engage in wrong actions, and automatically one’s mental defilements and wrong actions will diminish. Also one can observe that if one is close to one’s Guru, it is much easier to engage in virtue, thus one’s practice progresses and one’s positive qualities increase; but if one goes off on one’s own the whole practice is much more difficult. If one follows his instructions exactly then one’s qualities increase very quickly. This falling-away of faults and increase of virtues leads one to experience much happiness straight away, in this life, while the practice will also bear the fruit of more happiness in future lives.

The karmic results of proper reliance on the Spiritual Friend include the ripening in a fortunate rebirth and the result similar to the cause. The latter is that in future lives one continues to relate correctly to one’s Spiritual Friend and to receive unmistaken teachings from him, and thus one will continue to practise and progress.

Thus to sum up the advantages of devotion to the Spiritual Friend, in the short term one is born as a human being or a god, not falling into the realms of woe, and in the end one attains Liberation or complete Enlightenment.
1a.2 The disadvantages of not being devoted

[105] These then are the benefits of devoting oneself correctly to the Spiritual Friend. What problems arise if one does not do so?

[106] The essence of devotion to one’s Guru is to see in him the nature of all the enlightened activity of the Buddhas. If then one acts badly towards him, one is in effect acting badly towards all the Buddhas, and nothing could be more negative than that.

When we look at our Teacher he seems to be flesh and blood just like ourselves, so the thought that he is of the nature of all the Enlightened activities of the Buddhas is hard to develop. Certain arguments are given (section 1b.1) to help convince oneself of this.

[107] A single moment of anger towards one’s Guru is extremely negative — it will destroy the virtues accumulated through him over a very long period and result in an extremely long hell existence, as is taught in the Kalacakra-Tantra.

[108] The five immediate sins [see Glossary] are extremely serious and hard to purify, but even so they can be purified completely by certain tantric practices. Anger and contempt towards one’s Guru, however, is much more difficult to purify. At best, with great effort one can perhaps achieve a temporary amelioration.

[109] If one engages in very powerful, advanced practices, even practising continuously without sleeping, but at the same time feels aversion and contempt in one’s heart towards one’s Guru, all the arduous, ascetic practice will be in vain.

[110] If one loses one’s faith and respect towards one’s Teacher, not only will one be unable to make any further spiritual progress but even the qualities one has already developed in dependence on him will be lost. In this lifetime all sorts of internal and external hindrances will arise, and in many future lives one will be reborn in ill destinies.

[111] Even after that, when one is again reborn as a human being, the result similar to the cause of despising one’s Guru will be that one continues to lack faith and respect towards
Gurus. One will be separated from the Spiritual Friend and from the teaching. Thus one will lack the opportune, fortunate rebirth (see Meditation 2).

[112] Thus if one lacks devotion to one’s Spiritual Friend, or worse, having had it one turns away from it, then in this life and in future lives nothing but suffering and problems will result.

[113] So we can weigh up the advantages of proper adherence to a Spiritual Friend and the disadvantages of the contrary course, and come to understand how we should behave. Just as in business one thinks first of the possible profits and losses that will ensue from the various courses of action, so here, wanting to make a profit and avoid loss, one thinks of the advantages and disadvantages and resolves strongly to devote oneself properly to the Guru, who is the root of all good qualities, and not to misbehave towards him. Then besides the happiness one attains in this life, one will meet this Guru again and again in the future.

1b HOW TO DEVOTE ONESELF TO THE SPIRITUAL FRIEND IN THOUGHT

1b.1 The development of faith

The essence of proper devotion to the Spiritual Friend is to have faith in him. If one has faith, then the actual practice of devotion follows naturally; if not, there will be no real devotion. To develop faith in the Guru, we practise an analytical meditation using certain reasonings, which make us aware of his good qualities. If we are not aware of these, faith cannot arise.

[114-5] The central point is to consider that our Teacher is of the nature of the Wisdom-knowledge of all the Buddhas, which they have manifested as him in order to lead us. The sole purpose for the existence of the Buddhas is to benefit sentient beings, and they manifest to whatever extent they can help sentient beings by doing so. To some beings, whom they can help by manifesting in the Enjoyment Body, they will manifest in that way; to others, whom they can benefit by manifesting in an Emanation Body, they manifest in that way. To others again they manifest as ordinary Spiritual Friends, or even as deer and other animals, if this can help. Thus they must also be appear-
Meditation 1: Guru Devotion

ing to me in the way that is best for me, which since I am interested in the practice of Dharma must be in the form of the Spiritual Friend — this being a particularly effective way to benefit a disciple. The Buddha himself has said in a Sutra that Buddhas manifest for the sake of all sentient beings like this.

[116] In the Tantras too, it is taught that at the end of the eon, in the period of destruction, Vajradhara himself will manifest as a Guru to teach the Dharma. So there is no doubt that he will manifest now to someone like me who is interested in Dharma.

[117] Sometimes the Guru may treat us roughly and speak harshly to us, but we should bear in mind that he is an emanation of Vajradhara and try to avoid seeing faults in him.

[118] If we met a completely perfect and faultless person, we would still perceive faults in him. When Buddha Śākyamuni was in India, He was fully enlightened and completely free of faults, yet still Devadatta and many non-Buddhist teachers saw his actions as mistaken, though in fact these actions were devoid of any imperfection. [119] We project faults onto what is actually faultless because our mind is obscured by negative karmic tendencies. Our perceptions are distorted, just as in severe jaundice the eyesight can become affected so that even a white conch-shell appears yellow, or with other diseases a white, snow-covered mountain can appear blue, or one may hallucinate things that are not there at all. Grasping our distorted perceptions of the Guru as true, we react negatively towards him and thus accumulate further negative tendencies. We must therefore remind ourselves whenever we start seeing faults in our Guru’s behaviour, that this way of seeing is conditioned by our own karmic obscurations, and actually he is the manifestation of the Wisdom-knowledge of the Buddhas.

We may think that [at present we are free of diseases like jaundice and] what appears to our sight is true. But this is far from the case. Things appear to us as separate from us and existing truly and independently, but in fact they do not exist in the way in which they appear — they have no true existence. Similarly, that our Spiritual Friend appears to us to have faults does not necessarily imply that he really does.

In the main temple of Lhasa is a famous statue of the Buddha,
called the Jowo, to which Tibetans have for centuries gone on pilgrimage – now that the temple has been reopened by the Chinese authorities they go again. But it is said that some people’s minds are so heavily obscured that despite all the butter lamps in front of this image they are unable to see it, they perceive only a dark space. When these people undertake special practices to purify their negativities, then gradually they become able to see something of this statue.

Similarly, the same Guru is seen quite differently by different people. Some will feel spontaneous devotion as soon as they meet him, some will see him as just an ordinary person like themselves, and others will just feel anger towards him. If he has ten disciples, they will each perceive him in different ways, depending on their own karmic obscurations.

[120] Again, it is known that for special purposes the Buddhas sometimes manifest themselves in apparently faulty forms, even as maras or demons. Sometimes, for example to help animals who cannot speak or understand speech, they manifest as animals or birds. Sometimes, when necessary, they even manifest as material things such as water. For human beings, they manifest principally as Spiritual Friends and teach the Dharma through them. Thus if our Guru appears less than perfect, we can think that it is simply through skilful means that the Buddhas are manifesting in this way, to ripen us and other sentient beings according to our dispositions.

[121] In fact, when our perception is so restricted by the power of our karmic obscurations and defilements, this is really the best the Buddhas can do for us. For if they were all to stand in front of us in their perfect forms endowed with all the thirty-two Marks of a Great Being, saying “We are the Buddhas,” we would be unable to see them.

[122] So when we see faults in our Spiritual Friend, either they are simply our own mental projection, due to negative karmic impressions, or [the Buddhas] are manifesting in this apparently faulty way in order to guide us. Either way, it is as inappropriate to attribute the faults to him as to blame a mirror for the blemishes it reveals in one’s make-up. In reality, he is completely perfect.

[123] For these reasons, when we relate to a Spiritual
Friend, we must not only abandon negative behaviour towards him but must develop the firm recognition that he is the manifestation of the Compassion, Wisdom and Power of all the Buddhas. On the basis of recollecting his qualities in this way and abandoning our wrong projections about him, we develop faith in him. When we have this faith, we can devote ourselves properly to him and benefit from his teaching, but without it, our relationship will be incorrect and will not bring much benefit.

1b.2 Becoming respectful, by remembering the Guru's kindness

Besides this faith in the Spiritual Friend, we need a certain attitude of respect, so that we wish to put into practice all the teachings he gives us. This respect is developed by recollecting his kindness.

[124] We must think that not only is our Guru the manifestation of all the Buddhas, free of any fault and endowed with every good quality, but he has the greatest kindness to us, benefiting us incredibly. [125] On a worldly level, if someone gets a person released from prison and provides him with a pleasant house, good food and so on, the ex-prisoner will remember his kindness constantly. [126] But our Spiritual Friend’s kindness is much greater than this. Not concerned only with this life, he shows us how to eliminate the mental defilements and impressions that would otherwise lead us to extremely uncomfortable future existences in the realms of woe. Thus he brings us to be reborn as gods or human beings. [127] In addition, he shows us how to see that any kind of samsaric existence is unsatisfactory and how to attain Liberation, in which the faults of samsara are abandoned. Then he leads us into the Mahāyāna Path and through all the Bodhisattva Stages to the attainment of the Three Kāyas of a Buddha. Since all these attainments depend on the kindness of the Spiritual Friend, how can this kindness not be great?

[128] To repay the kindness of teaching even one sentence of Dharma would take a very long time, but the Spiritual Friend does not teach just one sentence – he teaches us the complete Dharma. How could such kindness be repaid?

[129] The lay life, completely involved in worldly activities,
work, worry and frustration, is like burning in a pit of fire. That one leaves this [and enters the religious life] is due to the kindness of the Spiritual Friend.

[130] Meeting pure Dharma teachings that are able to help us and developing confidence in them is the result of the Guru's kindness.

[131] So our Spiritual Friends are our rescuers saving us from the three realms of woe; ... guides who lead us to high rebirth as human beings or gods, and to the ultimate bliss of Liberation and Buddhahood; [132] the greatest doctors, able to cure our most deeply-rooted disease, the mental defilements; ... [133] those who free us from the bonds of defilements and karmic impressions that keep us bound in samsara; and the other things [listed in the root text]. If we remember these verses, we can recollect our Gurus' kindness towards us and so develop respect and adhere to them properly.

If we have not developed faith in the Spiritual Friend by recollecting his qualities, we shall regard him as just an ordinary person, and through pride consider ourself to have better qualities. If we have not developed respect by contemplating his kindness, then although we have faith in him and see him as a great being, we see no particular relationship between him and ourself. Only if we develop respect can great benefit come to us through this relationship so that our mind is effectively transformed.

1c HOW TO DEVOTE ONESELF TO THE SPIRITUAL FRIEND IN ACTION

[134] To sum up the previous section, every benefit and happiness we receive is the result of the kindness of our Spiritual Friend – both when we are ordinary beings, and when we have attained the Path of Insight and become Arya beings. It is natural to wish to repay this kindness. While it is extremely hard to repay it all, we should engage in practices by way of respect to him.

[135] From his side, the Guru has no desire to receive our offerings, service and respect, any more than the ground in which seed is sown desires the fruit of its growth. But as the farmer who sows the seed reaps the benefit by harvesting the
Meditation 1: Guru Devotion

Crop, so the disciple who serves his Guru in action as best he can will gather limitless merit within himself.

[136] How can giving offerings to the Spiritual Friend bring more merit than offering to all the Buddhas? One may feel doubtful about this, but to understand it, one must receive certain special teachings from the Lam rim.

[137] Many examples are given of the great benefits that come from devoting oneself in action to one’s Spiritual Friend.

Naropa was treated extremely harshly by his Guru, Tilopa, for some twelve years, but through it all he kept one-pointed confidence in his teacher and did everything he said, in any situation, however difficult. For this reason he attained Buddhahood in that very life. If you are interested, you can read his biography. 33

Milarepa too carried out every instruction of his Guru, Marpa, building several houses for him, carrying stones on his back even when his back became one great sore, and undergoing many other hardships. But because of this strong devotion to his Spiritual Friend, he also won Enlightenment in that life and became famous among Buddhist yogins. All this you can read about in Milarepa’s biography. 34

Then there is Drom-tön-pa, who before meeting his main Guru had a teacher who owned many sheep and cattle. Drom-tön-pa never slept but spent the whole night watching in case somebody came to steal these animals, while during the day he was doing every job needed on the farm. Because of serving his Guru day and night like this he became Drom-tön-pa the Wise, the central support of the Kadampa lineage.

Sakya Pandita, when his master became chronically sick and bed-ridden, nursed him day and night until he died. Through this intense devotion he became renowned as outstandingly wise.

Cha-yül-pa also nursed his Guru with extreme devotion when he was sick, reverently carrying his excreta down three flights of stairs with his own hands. While he was doing this he received powers of clairvoyance, such as the divine ear which enables one to hear the sounds of people and even insects at a great distance.

The text quotes just these few examples, but in fact all the
great meditators of India and Tibet gained their realizations because of powerful devotion to their Gurus, regardless of their own body, life and wealth.

[138] Therefore we who want to attain similar realizations must devote ourselves to the Spiritual Friend as these Masters of the Path did – making offerings to him and serving him in every way, prostrating to him, standing when he enters the room, massaging his body when he is sick, and anointing him with perfume. With our speech too we should honour him with praises, not necessarily reciting texts but informally.

[139] We should do everything that can make our Spiritual Friend happy, because to displease him is an obstacle in our practice. The best way of all to please him, the best means of devotion to him, is to practise all his instructions meticulously, doing exactly as he says and not doing anything he says is bad. For example, although Marpa had many other disciples, he was most pleased with Milarepa because it was Milarepa who practised the Dharma teachings he gave.

We should examine our own manner of devotion to the Spiritual Friend. If we find it is good we should rejoice and set our mind continually that way. If on the other hand we lack confidence in our Guru and regard him lightly, we must contemplate the meaning of these teachings so as to correct our attitude.
A Note from the Publisher

We hope you have enjoyed this Wisdom book. For your convenience, this digital edition is being delivered to you without “digital rights management” (DRM). This makes it easier for you to use across a variety of digital platforms, as well as preserve in your personal library for future device migration.

Our nonprofit mission is to develop and deliver to you the very highest quality books on Buddhism and mindful living. We invite you to consider making a donation to Wisdom in any amount through our website at wisdompubs.org. This will help enable us to continue developing excellent books and supporting the authors who write them—and distributing DRM-free eBooks.

We at Wisdom Publications sincerely hope this book has been of benefit to you, and we thank you for your support.
Exploring crucial points on the path to enlightenment, “Stages of the Path” literature continues to hold its place as one of the great treasures of Buddhist thought. In this volume, Geshe Rabten presents a structured explanation of the popular and practical text, The Essential Nectar of Holy Doctrine, by the 18th century scholar Yeshe Tsöndrü. Geshe Rabten’s teachings reveal how we may see life’s great value and, by taking up the profound practice described herein, make the most of its abundant opportunity.

In a voice both sweet and potent, The Essential Nectar reveals the essence of the path to enlightenment.

Geshe Rabten, a native of Kham, Tibet, received his education at Sera Monastery in Lhasa. Following the 1959 Chinese invasion of Tibet, he escaped to India, where he was appointed as a religious assistant to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He began instructing Western students in the late 1960s, and eventually moved to Rikon, Switzerland, where he founded Rabten Choeling Centre for Higher Tibetan Studies. He lived and taught in Switzerland until his death in 1986. He is the author of Advice from a Spiritual Friend, Echoes of Voidness, and Song of the Profound View.

Martin Willson received his PhD in radioastronomy at Cambridge University before spending 12 years as a Buddhist monk in Australia, Switzerland, and France. He is the author of In Praise of Tara. Now married, he lives in Swansea, South Wales, United Kingdom.