

Handout #8

An Outline of the Path to Enlightenment

by Nick Ribush

The Buddha taught so that beings would be happy and satisfied. Having attained the ultimate happiness of enlightenment himself, out of love and compassion for each sentient being he wanted to share his experience with them all. But he could not transplant his realizations into the minds of others, remove their suffering by hand or wash away their ignorance with water – he could only teach them to develop their minds for themselves, as he had done. Thus, he showed the path to enlightenment.

The nature of the mind

Beings with mind are two: buddhas and sentient beings. Buddhas were once sentient beings, but through completing the practice of Dharma they fully purified their minds of both gross and subtle obscurations and attained enlightenment, or Buddhahood.

Sentient beings are also two: those beyond cyclic existence (samsara) and those within. Those beyond cyclic existence (arahants) have purified their minds of the gross obscurations but not the subtle. Samsaric sentient beings are suffering from both levels of obscuration and are under the control of the disturbing negative minds (delusions) and their actions (karma).

The mind, or stream of consciousness, is formless – it has no shape or color. It is impermanent, that is changing from moment to moment. All impermanent phenomena are the products of causes, thus so is the mind – it does not arise from nothing. Furthermore, since effects must be similar in nature to their principal causes, the principal cause of the mind must also be formless and not some material substance such as the brain.

The mind proceeds from a previous state of mind; each thought moment is preceded by a prior thought moment and there has never been a first. Moreover, each mind comes from its own previous continuity and not from another mind such as some “cosmic consciousness” or the minds of one’s parents. Hence, each individual’s mind is beginningless. And just as physical energy never goes out of existence, disappearing into nothingness, so too does mental energy continue forever; only its state changes.

How is it possible to attain enlightenment?

The mind is different from empty space, which is also formless, in that it has clear light nature and the ability to perceive objects. Our minds are like mirrors smeared with filth – our minds' clear light nature is polluted by the delusions. However, just as the filth is not inextricably mixed with the potentially pure, clear mirror beneath, similarly the delusions are not one with the mind. An appropriate method such as washing with soap and water will clean the mirror; the right way to purify the mind of the delusions and their impressions, the subtle obscurations, is to practice Dharma. This results in the ultimate happiness of enlightenment and, since the minds of all sentient beings have clear light nature, all have the potential to become buddhas. The difficulty lies in finding the opportunity and the interest to practice Dharma.

The previous human rebirth

Even if we have the opportunity and the interest, we have to be taught to practice. Finding a perfectly qualified teacher is the most important thing in life, and once we have found this teacher we must follow him or her correctly – this is the root of the path to enlightenment.

Sentient beings in cyclic existence are of six types: those in the three lower realms – hell (narak) beings, hungry ghosts (pretas) and animals – and those in the three upper realms – humans, “non-gods” (asuras) and gods (suras). The sentient beings in the three lower realms cannot practice Dharma because they are oppressed by the heavy sufferings of ignorance, deprivation and pain. In the three upper realms, only humans can hope to practice Dharma – the suras and asuras are too distracted by enjoying high sense pleasures or squabbling over them.

Even amongst human beings it is extremely difficult to find the freedom and circumstances to practice perfectly. Most are born at a time or in a place where there are neither teachers nor teachings. Even when born at an opportune time or place there will be either personal or environmental hindrances to practice. If, upon reflection, we find ourselves with the perfect chance, we should rejoice and enthusiastically make the most of our precious opportunity.

As Dharma practitioners, the least we can do is strive for the happiness of future lives, that is rebirth in the upper realms. If we are wiser we shall try to attain the everlasting bliss of nirvana, liberation from the whole of cyclic existence. And the wisest amongst us will realize that we have a chance to reach the ultimate goal of enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings and will set their minds on that alone. Every single moment of our precious human lives gives us the opportunity to purify eons of negative karma and take giant steps towards enlightenment by engaging in the profound practices of the Mahayana path. Wasting even a second of this life is

an incalculable loss.

How do we waste our lives? By following the attachment that clings to the happiness of just this life. Practicing Dharma means renouncing this life, that is the happiness of this life.

All sentient beings want happiness and do not want suffering, but these desires alone are insufficient for them to accomplish their goals. Most sentient beings do not know that happiness and suffering are the result of both principal and secondary causes. Most recognize the secondary, or contributory, causes, such as food, liquid, cold, heat and other sense objects and environmental conditions, but consider these to be the true causes of happiness and misery. Thus, most of us are outward-looking and materialistic in our pursuit of fulfillment.

However, the principal causes, the mental imprints, or karmas, are what determine whether we shall experience happiness or suffering when we come into contact with a particular sense object. Positive karmas bring happiness; the negative bring suffering. If we want to be happy all the time, under any circumstances, we have to fill our minds with positive karma and completely eradicate all the negative. It is only through practicing Dharma that we can do all this, and practicing Dharma means first renouncing this life. On this foundation, all other practices are built.

Dharma practitioners do not care whether this life is happy or not—they are far more forward-looking than that—and just through this sincere change in attitude they experience more happiness in this life than do most others. And they create much positive karma, which brings better and happier future lives, and liberation from samsara. Those who work for this life alone rarely experience contentment, create much negative karma, and suffer in many lifetimes to come.

Simply desiring a better future life is not enough: we have to create the cause of an upper rebirth consciously and with great effort, by practicing morality. And to receive a perfect human rebirth, with its eight freedoms and ten richnesses for Dharma practice, we must also practice generosity and the other perfections of patience, enthusiastic perseverance, concentration and wisdom. Finally, all these causes have to be linked to the desired result by stainless prayer. Hence it is easy to see why a perfect human rebirth is so hard to get – it is extremely difficult to create its cause. One virtually has to have a perfect human rebirth in order to create the cause for another.

Impermanence and death

We are certain to die but have no idea when it will happen. Each day could be our last yet we act as if we were going to live forever. This attitude prevents us from practicing

Dharma at all or else leads us to postpone our practice or to practice sporadically or impurely. We create negative karma without a second thought, rationalizing that it can always be purified later. And when death does come, we die with much sorrow and regret, seeing clearly but too late how we lost our precious chance.

By meditating on the certainty of death, how our lives are continuously running out and how uncertain is the time of death, we shall be sure to practice Dharma and to practice right now. When we meditate further on how material possessions, worldly power, friends and family, and even our most cherished body cannot help us at the time of death, we shall be sure to practice only Dharma.

Our situation is this: we have been born human with all the conditions of a perfect human rebirth, but so far, our lives have been spent almost exclusively in the creation of negative karma. If we were to die right now – and where is the guarantee that we won't? – we would definitely be reborn in one of the three lower realms, from which it is nearly impossible to escape. But ignorance prevents us from recognizing the urgency and danger of our position, and instead of seeking an object of refuge we relax and spend our time creating only more negative karma.

Refuge

When we have a problem we usually take refuge in sense objects: when we are hungry we eat food; when thirsty we drink something. These things may help solve such superficial problems temporarily, but what we really need is a solution to our deepest, most chronic problems: the ignorance, attachment and aversion so firmly rooted in our minds—the source of all suffering.

When we are seriously ill we rely on a doctor to make the diagnosis and prescribe the appropriate medication, and on a nurse to help us take it. We are now suffering from the most serious illness there is, the disease of the delusions. The supreme physician, the Buddha, has already made the diagnosis and prescribed the medicine, the Dharma; it is up to us to take it. The Sangha, the monastic community, help us put the Dharma teachings into practice.

Following karma

What does it mean to take the medicine of Dharma, to put the teachings into practice? The Buddha has shown us the nature of reality; now we must try to live in accordance with it by observing the law of karma, cause and effect. Positive karma brings happiness; negative bring suffering. Actions of body, speech and mind leave positive or negative imprints on the consciousness, which are like seeds planted in the ground. Under suitable conditions they ripen and produce their results.

The positivity or negativity of a particular action is determined primarily by the motivation behind it and its effect, not by its outward appearance. Basically, actions motivated by the desire for the happiness of just this life are negative, whereas those motivated by the desire for happiness in future lives, liberation or enlightenment are, if appropriate, positive. Since we have neither the insight to detect the true motivation for our actions nor the clairvoyance to determine their effects, the Buddha laid down a fundamental code of moral conduct for beginners to follow: the ten moralities. Actions opposite to these are negative, the ten non-virtues: three of body (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct), four of speech (lying, slandering, speaking harshly, gossiping), three of mind (covetousness, malice, wrong views). In practice, we must avoid creating negative actions and purify the imprints that those of the past have left on our mind streams. We must develop whatever positive tendencies we have and acquire those that are missing. In this way, we shall gradually develop our minds to perfection and experience ever-increasing happiness as we do.

Renunciation of suffering

The happiness we experience in samsara is dangerous because we get attached to it very easily. However, while it appears to be happiness, it isn't true happiness: it never lasts and it always changes into suffering, and in fact is merely a lessening of the suffering we were just experiencing. Just as we feel aversion to obvious sufferings such as pain, illness and worry and want to be free of them, so should we renounce transient pleasures and even upper rebirths and strive single-pointedly to escape from samsara. The fully renounced mind, the first of the three principal teachings of Buddhism, is that which yearns for liberation day and night. It is the main source of energy for those who seek nirvana, and serves as the basis for their development of perfect concentration and right view of reality as they proceed towards their goal of arhantship.

Working for others

Equanimity

But it is not enough to strive simply for one's own liberation. We are the same as all other sentient beings in wishing for all happiness and freedom from even the tiniest suffering, and it is selfish and cruel to desire and strive for everlasting bliss and perfect peace for ourselves alone. The most intelligent will see that until each and every sentient being has finally found the highest possible happiness, one's responsibility to others has not been fulfilled. Why responsibility? Because all our past, present and future happiness up to and including enlightenment depends on all other sentient beings without exception. It is our duty to repay this kindness.

The first hindrance we must overcome is our chronic habit of feeling attached to some sentient beings, averse to others and indifferent towards the rest. As our ego—the wrong conception of the way we exist—makes us feel “I” very strongly, we strive for our egoistic happiness and shy away from whatever we deem unpleasant. We associate various sense objects with these feelings, and when these objects happen to be other beings, we label them “friend,” “enemy” and “stranger.” As a result, we become strongly attached to and do as much as we can to help our friends, we hate and try to harm our enemies as much as possible, and avoid and ignore the vast majority of sentient beings, strangers who we feel are totally unconnected with either our happiness or our problems. Therefore, we have to train our minds to feel equanimity towards all sentient beings, to feel them all equally deserving of our efforts to help them find the happiness they seek.

Even in this life, the friend to whom we are attached and who we try to help so much has not always been our friend. Earlier on we had no idea of his (or her) existence, and as he neither helped nor hindered our pursuit of happiness we categorized him as a “stranger.” When later he somehow or other gratified our ego, we began to regard him as useful, as a “friend,” and thus fostered his attention by being nice to him and doing whatever we could to look good in his eyes, concealing our faults in the process. But the friendly relations between the two of us being maintained by a certain amount of effort and a good deal of deception on both sides will not last. Sooner or later one of us will do something to upset the other or will get bored with the relationship. Then the other person, who appeared so desirable, will start to become unattractive, something to be avoided. Gradually, or even suddenly, the relationship will deteriorate and we shall become “enemies.” Of course, this doesn’t always happen, but all of us must have had experiences like it.

Hence, the labels of friend, enemy and stranger we apply to others are very temporary and not based on some ultimate aspect of reality to be found in the other. They are projected by the ego on the basis of whether that person is useful for our own happiness, causes us problems, or does not seem to be involved one way or the other.

In some previous lives our best friends of this life have been our worst enemies. The same is true of our enemies of today – in previous lives they were parents, friends and strangers too. As these ever-changing samsaric relationships are beginningless, we can see that each sentient being has functioned as our friend, enemy and stranger, taking each role an infinite number of times. Thus, all sentient beings are equal in this way, and none are more deserving of our help than others, irrespective of the tunnel vision of our present view. Furthermore, as long as we remain in samsara these relationships will continue to change. Therefore, there is no reason to be attached to

our friends, who will soon become harm-giving enemies, or to hate our enemies, who are sure to become beloved friends. By fully opening our minds and seeing things in the broadest possible perspective we shall see all sentient beings as they really are—equal—and all will be attractive and dear.

Seeing all sentient beings as mother

If all sentient beings have been our enemy perhaps we should try to harm them all equally! While it may be true that, out of ignorance and anger they have all hurt us in the past, their kindness far exceeds their cruelty. By depending equally on every single sentient being, and only by this, we receive the sublime, everlasting happiness of enlightenment. Even in a worldly way has each sentient being been kind—all have been our mother.

Each sentient being has had an infinite number of rebirths, but the mother of this life has not been the mother of each of our previous lives. Usually we have not even been born together in the same realm or in the same type of body. There is no samsaric body or realm that has not been experienced by any sentient being and no time that sentient beings first began to be mother. Thus, each sentient being has been our mother an infinite number of times and, constantly keeping this fact in mind, we should try to see each one as mother. Imagine that our mother had been caught in a fire and burnt beyond recognition – we know it's her but can't tell by looking; it's the same stream of consciousness, and we feel incredible compassion for her unbearable suffering. Similarly, if we have done the above analytical meditation properly, when we see insects, for example, we shall feel that they are our mother of a previous time—it is the same stream of consciousness – but having to undergo the great suffering of being trapped in such an unfortunate body. Hence love and compassion will arise whenever we see any sentient being.

A mother's kindness

Why do we easily feel love and compassion for our mother? Because our love and compassion are impure, partial. They are not directed equally at all, only towards those who help us, our “friends.” And our mother is the best friend of all.

We must meditate on just how kind our mother has been. She happily underwent many difficulties to bear us; she fed us and protected us from harm when we were helpless; she taught us to speak, walk and look after ourselves; she ensured we had a good education; she provided us with the necessities and enjoyments of life. She has always put our welfare ahead of hers: who else has been so kind? The more we recollect the kindness of the mother, the greater will be our affection for her – this is

natural. The more we recognize other sentient beings as mother, the greater will be our affection for them all. And the greater will be the thought of repaying their kindness.

Repaying kindness

Wanting to repay others' kindness is also a natural and positive emotion. The repayment should at least equal the kindness shown. Since we receive enlightenment from each and every mother sentient being, it is our responsibility to see that each also receives it.

Cherishing others

The greatest hindrance to enlightenment is the self-cherishing mind, which puts one's own happiness ahead of everybody else's and causes us to act accordingly. Every personal problem we have ever experienced has come from this; so too has every interpersonal problem, from the smallest argument among children to wars between nations. The more we think about it the more we shall see that the self-cherishing mind is the most dangerous phenomenon in existence. Yet it can be destroyed and replaced by the mind that cherishes others, putting oneself last of all. This is the greatest mind we can generate – from it arises the state of enlightenment. We must cultivate the mind that cherishes others.

From seeing that no sentient being, ourselves included, wants or deserves happiness and freedom from suffering more than any other, a feeling of equality arises. As the desire for these ends is the same, why should I act as if my happiness were more important than anybody else's? There can be no logical justification for such an attitude. Moreover, if all suffering – from the smallest to the greatest – arises from the self-cherishing mind, surely I should wait not a moment longer to destroy it completely. Thinking like this, we engage in the practice of exchanging self for others.

Exchanging self for others is not a physical practice. It means that so far, since beginningless time, we have been going around harboring the thought deep in our hearts, "My happiness is the most important thing there is." It may not be conscious, but its presence is reflected in our actions. So now, instead of putting ourselves first we put ourselves last: "My happiness is the least important of all." Through this we can destroy the self-cherishing mind.

The practice of taking and giving

We also practice the meditation of taking the suffering of others upon ourselves and

giving them all happiness. Visualizing all sentient beings in the three realms undergoing their respective sufferings, we inhale all those sufferings in the form of black smoke, which smashes the self-cherishing conception at our hearts. When we exhale, we send out pure white light, which reaches all sentient beings, bringing them everything they want and need, temporally and spiritually – all the realizations of the path, from devotion to the spiritual master to enlightenment. We visualize all sentient beings in the aspect of buddhas.

Arising from this meditation we may feel it was of no use – all the sentient beings are still suffering, just as they were when we started it. But each time we do this meditation we damage our self-cherishing mind and take a giant step towards enlightenment.

Generating bodhichitta

We should wish sincerely and pray from the bottom of our hearts: “May all sentient beings be free from all suffering and ignorance and find the perfect bliss of enlightenment.” Feeling it our responsibility to see them there, we should vow to bring about each sentient being’s enlightenment ourselves, and understand what we must do to fulfill this obligation. In our present condition, we can’t even guarantee ourselves temporal happiness—how can we hope to bring others to perfect bliss? Only a buddha can lead others to buddhahood, therefore, each of us must reach that state in order to help others get there. Thus, we determine: “For the sole purpose of enlightening all sentient beings I shall reach enlightenment myself.” When this thought becomes a realization underlying our every action it is called *bodhichitta*.

Bodhichitta is the most precious mind we can strive for – it is the principal cause of enlightenment. It is the most virtuous mind – with bodhichitta we can obliterate vast accumulations of negative karma and create huge amounts of merit. It is the most beneficial mind – when we have bodhichitta, whatever we do helps all other sentient beings in the highest way, and when through it we have attained enlightenment, we work as buddhas for the enlightenment of all sentient beings. To fulfil our vow of enlightening all sentient beings we must first receive bodhichitta, by training our mind in all the preceding meditations, starting from devotion to the spiritual master.

To help us in this we take the sixty-four bodhisattva vows from a fully qualified teacher and train ourselves in the six perfections of charity, morality, patience, enthusiastic perseverance, concentration and wisdom.

Emptiness: the right view of reality

Traditional texts on the graduated path to enlightenment will deal in some detail with

the latter two perfections, but much of this is too technical for this paper. On the prerequisite basis of perfect moral conduct – impeccable observation of the law of karma—we develop single-pointed concentration. Having gained conceptual insight into emptiness, the ultimate nature of all phenomena, we use our perfect concentration to gain direct, non-conceptual insight into the ultimate nature of our own minds. With this achieved, we gradually develop insight into the nature of all other phenomena.

Practicing all the analytical meditations of the path in their correct sequence brings us the three major realizations of the fully renounced mind, bodhichitta, and right view, the wisdom realizing emptiness. Thus, we are qualified to enter the quick path to enlightenment, the *Vajrayana*.

Tantra: the highest path

There are two ways to reach enlightenment, one slow, the other quick. By practicing the *Paramitayana*, the perfection vehicle, one may take three countless great eons to attain the goal. Lifetime after lifetime the bodhisattvas traveling this path take rebirth in samsara for the benefit of all sentient beings, gradually approaching buddhahood through development of the six perfections and other practices. We see some examples of this in stories of Shakyamuni Buddha's previous lives (the *Jataka Tales*).

But for other bodhisattvas this is too slow. Those who are filled with compassion for the suffering of other sentient beings, who feel unbearable at the thought of others suffering for even a second longer, who feel other sentient beings' suffering as their own, as if they themselves had been dipped into boiling water, who want to put an immediate end to samsara, who are fully qualified physically and mentally, have been given the supreme path of tantra by the Buddha.

Since this tantric path to enlightenment is the quickest, it is also the most difficult to follow. The consequences of mistakes made by tantric practitioners are far more serious than those made by followers of lower paths. Thus, few beings have the ability or opportunity to enter this path.

As ever, the most important thing is to have a fully qualified spiritual master. Having established a master-disciple relationship, the most important thing is to follow the master correctly. He will give his students initiations, tantric vows and teachings on the two stages of tantra, the development and the completion stages. Under his guidance, the disciple will practice the special meditations, and for the rare and most fortunate few it is possible to gain enlightenment in this very life, that is entering and completing the path in a single lifetime.

This, in brief, is an outline of the path to enlightenment, as explained by most of the Tibetan schools of Buddhism. They vary in their modes of presentation and in the study and meditation techniques employed, but their similarities are much greater than their differences. They all follow the graduated path to enlightenment.

Colophon:

Reprinted with permission from Nicholas Ribush. Originally written in 1999.