



A Gift of Liberation
Course Three—What You Were Always Meant to Be
Homework Master, Class One: The Beauty of the Teachings

1) How does a commentary to *The Lamp on the Path*, the classic work on the steps of the path by Lord Atisha, define the Dharma, or teachings of the Buddha? What famous instruction is contained within this definition, and how might it apply to finding our true passion in life?

[Here is how the Dharma is defined in this work, as quoted by Pabongka Rinpoche in his own classic on the steps:

What is it that we call the “teachings of the Buddha”? It is any teaching which is meant for those who hope to attain a life as a high being or human within this realm, or who hopes to attain the nectar of deathlessness. It shows them, correctly, what things they must come to realize; what things they must come to abandon; what things they must bring about; and what things they must practice.

The four groups of “things” here are a reference to the Four Truths of a Realized Being (sometimes misnamed the “Four Noble Truths” due to a mistranslation). The first refers to the Truth of Suffering; to want to get out of a jail, we have to realize we are in one: we need to see that, without understanding, everything around us in this world can only hurt us in the end.

The second refers to the Truth of the Cause of Suffering, which is the fact that we don’t know how the world really works. We must give up or “abandon” this misunderstanding if we want to be happy. The third refers to the Truth of the End of Suffering, which is something that we seek to bring about. And then finally the fourth refers to the Truth of the Path to the End of Suffering, which we must practice to stop our pain.

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Let's see how these four apply to finding our true passion in life. First of all we must recognize it if we are not doing what we were truly meant to do, what we would most enjoy to do: we must admit to ourselves that our life's purpose is not yet fulfilled. This is a recognition of the Truth of Suffering.

Then we must identify why we have not found our life's purpose, and abandon this source of our trouble. In the case of our life's passion, we need to get rid of our ignorance: the fact that we don't understand why we haven't found our passion. And that is not realizing that we haven't been helping others to find *their* passion, which is causing us to not find ours.

The Truth of the End of Suffering in this case is a place that we reach where we have finally found what it is we were meant to do in this life, the thing we have the most passion for. The Truth of the Path is where we realize that we must practice the cause for finding our passion, which is of course to help others to find their passion.

When we have fully understood these four steps, then that understanding itself becomes the teaching of the Buddha—the Dharma—and we can have the pleasure of sharing it with others, to help them succeed.]

2) Pabongka Rinpoche lists four ways in which the teachings of the Buddha are extraordinary, because he wants us to be excited to delve into these teachings. What is the first of these four, and what are some parts of the teaching that it applies to?

[The first of the four wonderful qualities of the teachings mentioned here is that these teachings are perfectly internally consistent. Pabongka Rinpoche gives a few examples of parts of these teachings of the Buddha that might seem to contradict each other, but in the course of his masterpiece explains why they are anything but. Let's take a look at the parts that he mentions.

The greater way and the lower way, known in Sanskrit as the Mahayana and the Hinayana. These are two great historical divisions of the Buddha's teachings, and at first glance they might seem to contradict each other, particularly in their long-term goals and their explanation of how the world works: of emptiness. With training though we learn that the teachings of the lower way about our personal suffering are a perfect foundation for

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appreciating the suffering of others, and doing something about it by practicing the greater way. We also learn that the lower presentations of emptiness are a perfect segue into the more complete presentations, and very useful for teaching students of varying capacities.

The teachings on vowed morality, particularly the path of ordained monks and nuns, and the teachings of the Secret Way, known in Sanskrit as the Vinaya and Tantra. The teachings on vowed morality emphasize for example the need for sexual purity—for monks and nuns, complete celibacy—and the avoidance of alcohol and other intoxicants. In the secret teachings, we learn how the male and female energies can be used as a very powerful tool for reaching enlightenment to save all living beings. We also see something like wine used in ceremonies much in the way that it is used in the Christian church for mass or communion.

With training we learn that there is no contradiction at all between these two sets of teachings. The way to make our male or female energy strong within our body is to strictly keep our sexual morality, for example in avoiding adultery or hurting others' relationships. This strengthened inner energy is called prana, and plays a vital role in transforming the body into a form which can serve all living beings.

And of course wine taken in a Christian church, if properly transformed into the blood of Christ, is no longer alcohol but rather a sacred substance which can also lead us to our goal of serving all beings. This is the same in the Secret Way of the teachings of the Buddha.]

3) What everyday example does Pabongka Rinpoche give for understanding apparent contradictions in the teachings?

[Rinpoche gives the example of a person suffering from a serious fever. When the fever is at its height, the doctor may tell the patient that they should avoid taking any meat or alcohol: that this could even cause them to lose their life.

Later, when the fever has subsided, and the element of air is predominating within the patient's body, the same doctor might even tell the person that they *must* now take meat and alcohol, to bring the wind down.

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It would seem that these two pieces of advice, especially given to a single patient, might be contradictory. But we can easily understand from the example that there are different times in the treatment of a single person when opposite remedies might be most effective.

Pabongka Rinpoche compares this case to that of the different parts of the Buddhist teaching mentioned before: the seeming inconsistencies between the greater way and the lesser, and between the instructions on vowed morality and the secret instructions. None of the teachings then display any internal inconsistency: it just depends on the spiritual level that we have reached at that point.]

4) How does Pabongka Rinpoche recommend that we, as teachers, view the almost contradictory levels of the teachings on the steps of the path?

[The Rinpoche points out that the primary task which bodhisattvas have taken on themselves is to serve the needs of every living being. To do so, these bodhisattvas are going to need a big “tool kit”: they’re going to have to know and be able to teach all the steps of the path, whether they relate to persons of lesser, medium, or advanced capacity.

If rather we view the lower steps as unnecessary, or even inconsistent with the higher steps, then we will fail to take the time to learn them. And then we will find ourselves unable to share them with people who need to focus on these more foundational steps for a longer length of time.

Nowadays, with the Dharma just beginning in the western world, many of us find ourselves in the role of teacher very quickly. Like the bodhisattvas described by Pabongka Rinpoche, we need to learn every bit of spiritual information that we can which may be helpful to any of the people whom we are called upon to guide. And we ourselves need to be extremely well versed in all of these subjects. (Which is to say, we need to work steadily through the 18 courses of the syllabus of the Asian Classics Institute, if we have any hope of really helping others!)]

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5) What description of his Lama did Dromton Je, the great disciple of Lord Atisha, give that is used to illustrate the internal consistency of all Buddhist teachings? What are three different ways of interpreting this description?

[Dromton Je once said of Lord Atisha that “The one who knows how to use all four corners of all the Buddha’s teachings at once is my Lama.” Pabongka Rinpoche lists three ways in which these words have been interpreted.

Some have said that the “four corners” mentioned here are a reference to the teachings for those of lesser, medium, and greater capacity—along with the teachings of the Secret Way.

Others have said that the reference is explained by using the metaphor of a single dice. No matter how we throw a dice, it will land with four corners facing up. And no matter which of the steps of the path to enlightenment which we are practicing, we find implied within it all of the other steps as well.

Pabongka Rinpoche though says that his own precious Lama stated that the comparison being made was to a small sitting carpet, which comes automatically with four different corners. Just as one carpet then contains everything, automatically, all the different subjects of the vast teachings of the Buddha are automatically covered in the steps of the path, which present how any one person anywhere can attain complete enlightenment.]

6) What example does Pabongka Rinpoche give to illustrate the need to apply what we learn to our own personal situation?

[Horse racing has always been a popular diversion in pastoral Tibet. A rider who knows he is racing the next day will normally take his horse to the race course (most often just marked out through a meadow or two, and around this or that tree) and take the steed through the course a few times until it is familiar with all the turns. And then when the horse runs the race the next day, he will know what to expect.

Pabongka Rinpoche compares going to classes and thinking later on at home about what we’ve learned to getting the horse familiar with the

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course. And he compares our actual meditation and other practice to running the race itself.

He warns us not to be like a foolish jockey who takes his horse out to one course the day before and then runs him on a different course the next day. That is, the Rinpoche is saying that we shouldn't come to a class and listen to a teaching, and then fail to try practicing it right away: seeing how it can apply to our own personal life, immediately.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn't know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, meditating on three different points made in today's teaching that you can apply to some problem or goal in your own personal life, immediately. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:



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Homework Master, Class Two:
Every Word Advice for Ourselves

1) The second wondrous quality of the lam-rim teachings is reflected in the word “Kadampa”; explain why. How might we apply this idea in our search for a life with passion in it?

[“Kadampa” is a Tibetan word which is applied to the school of Tibetan Buddhism headed by the Dalai Lamas (this school is also called the “Gelukpa”). Technically, the “Old Kadampas” are the lineage that reaches from Lord Atisha up to just before Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419). The “New Kadampas” begin with Je Tsongkapa and stretch up to the present time.

The Tibetan word *ka* (*bka'*) means *word*, or *command*, and here refers to the Word or Teachings of Lord Buddha. *Dampa* (*gdams pa*) means *personal advice*. As we see in the text during an exchange between Je Tsongkapa and his student Kachu Rinchen Pel, the word Kadampa then means “A person for whom every single word in the teachings strikes them as personal advice.”

Now the theme of Course Three of this series on the Steps to Enlightenment is finding our passion in life, or rekindling our passion for our career or relationship. To accomplish a Kadampa Meditation on this goal, we listen to the steps of the path and apply each of them to finding passion.

For example, we listen to the steps on finding a teacher and consider whom we could turn to for advice in finding passion. We listen to the steps on death awareness, and understand that we will need a new method to maintain passion in our career and relationship over a long period of time. And then with the teachings on emptiness and seeds (which we could call “dependent origination”) we learn that to find our own passion in life we must plant the seeds by helping someone else to do so.

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This gives us a good feel for the idea that every one of the Steps to Enlightenment can be for us personal advice in whatever goal we seek.]

2) How is it that, following Pabongka Rinpoche's thinking, we might see a typical day at work as an exercise in three different steps of the lam-rim?

[At this point in his masterpiece, the Rinpoche mentions first how we might apply the teachings on the Wish for Enlightenment, from the steps of the path for those of greater capacity, to our immediate life. In the case of our office, as we pass through these teachings in class we might try to develop within ourselves a vision of our entire company as a mandala, or enlightened realm: as a place where each employee understands clearly how they can plant seeds to make the office a happy and successful place.

He then mentions applying to our immediate life the teachings on dependent origination, from the steps for a person of medium capacity. Once we have learned what this cumbersome term "dependent origination" really means, we understand that it simply refers to the fact that everything and everybody around us is coming from seeds in our own mind, planted there by how we have treated others day to day.

With this understanding in hand, we can appreciate how this particular step of the lam-rim applies, for example, to a difficult person at our workplace. Someone close to us in the office is constantly criticizing us, so we take our understanding of seeds and work our way out of the problem with this person, by being very careful to shut off any criticism we are doling out to others. Then the person will stop.

The Rinpoche also mentions, at this point, how we might apply the steps of the lam-rim on developing quietude, or deep meditation, in our daily life. The goal of meditation is of course the capacity to focus our attention in a single-pointed way, without distraction or dullness. In our example here, we would use our heightened attention to stay very observant of our own feelings about the person who is criticizing us. This would help us prevent ourselves from falling into anger or sadness about the situation: we simply plant the seeds to fix it.]

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3) People often notice that, during a Buddhist teaching in a sizable group, it seems to them that the Lama is addressing their own personal life, or even criticizing them personally. How can we view this phenomenon when it happens to us?

[Rather than being disturbed that the Lama in a large teaching seems to be singling us out for attention—or even criticism—we should rather be happy that we are having a genuine, spontaneous experience of *kadampa*: the Lama’s words are striking us as targeted, personal advice.

Let’s remember the idea of the “three spheres” during this experience: we have created the Lama up there saying something about us; we have created ourselves to sit here and be the object of what they say; and we have created the interaction between us. What this means is that there must be some kind of seed within us which is bringing this particular theme to us.

As with any negative experience, we can profit if we take refuge in the understanding that it could never have happened without our doing something similar to someone else. We distill in our minds the essence of what’s happening to us (here, someone being critical of us), and then we investigate our own life to see how we can do more of the opposite (be more supportive of others, encourage them).

This exercise is always pleasant, because we always seek to do the opposite of what is bothering us. Knowledge of how the world really works is a blissful path to bliss.]

4) What is the third great quality of the teachings on the steps of the path, and from where does its power derive?

[The third great quality of the teachings of the lam-rim is that, by learning them, we can easily understand the great ideas that the Enlightened Ones are trying to share with us, to make our life successful and perfectly meaningful.

It’s very significant that—as he describes this third quality—Pabongka Rinpoche equates the teachings on the steps to “the advices of our Lama.”

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This gives us an insight into the place from which the power of this third quality is derived.

That is, the real vehicle which allows us to easily comprehend the greatest ideas of the Buddhas is not just the summary contained within the lam-rim, but the fact that this summary is presented to us by a Lama, a Teacher, with whom we share a personal relationship.

This connection to a living lineage is what really allows us to delve into the minds of the Buddhas, since (as we will learn further on) a true Lama *is* the embodiment of every Enlightened Being in the entire universe.]

5) What is the one great idea of all of Buddhism, and what other two ideas does it always imply?

[As we learn the third of the great qualities of the lam-rim, we come to appreciate how these teachings help us grasp the greatest ideas of more than two thousand years of Buddhism itself. Pabongka Rinpoche takes this opportunity to identify the very greatest of all these great ideas: the worldview where we see that the world, and everything and everyone within it, are coming not from themselves but from the seeds we have planted within us.

With this view, we have the power to achieve any great good that we wish: we just plant the proper seeds.

Pabongka Rinpoche points out that this greatest idea implies within it the other two ideas of a well-known triad called the “Three Principal Paths.” The impetus which drives us to seek a new view of the world is the pain that we ourselves encounter as our life progresses—and this is the first of these three paths, or realizations.

And it doesn’t take long for a recognition of our own pain to take us on to the recognition that every other person around us is suffering from the same pain—to the desire to free them from that pain, which is the second of the three paths. With these three then we have covered really all the great ideas of the Enlightened Ones.]

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6) What is the fourth great quality of the teachings on the steps to the path; what does it *not* refer to; and how does it relate to the other three qualities?

[The fourth great quality of the teachings of the lam-rim is that “they enable us, automatically, to avoid the Great Mistake.”

And what is the great mistake? It is to criticize or discount any of the many teachings of Buddhism, which would be something like denying or denigrating the only cure for AIDS in the world.

Notice that we have to distinguish between “criticizing” and “thinking critically.” Lord Buddha was very careful to say that we should think critically about what he taught: a person who just blindly accepts everything that a teacher says will blindly accept the opposite teaching from someone else, and then will obviously be very unlikely to put this advice into practice in their life.

If though a teacher whom we feel respect for teaches us a certain idea, we need at least to consider it carefully and—if we have trouble accepting it at present—we have a responsibility to “put it on the shelf” for further investigation, rather than rejecting it outright or criticizing it.

Pabongka Rinpoche points out that, once we come to a recognition of the first three qualities of the lam-rim teachings, we will (as the third quality itself is worded) *automatically* avoid the Great Mistake. That is, it’s not really possible for us to reject a teaching once we grasp that it is completely true and internally consistent; once it strikes us as true advice for our own personal life; and once we have had the experience of a deep and easily achieved insight into the thought processes of a Buddha themselves, by studying these steps of the path.]

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Homework, Class Three: The Benefits of Learning

1) What, according to Pabongka Rinpoche, is the one thing that determines whether or not our practice of this path will have the effect on us that we hope it will?

[The Rinpoche says that before engaging in the study of the lam-rim, or any other spiritual path, we must first understand the traditional preliminaries for engaging in this study. For us here, this means learning the proper “etiquette” for studying with a teacher. Otherwise, he says, none of the actual study itself will succeed in affecting our mind in the way that we hope it will: none of it will stick, none of it will bring us spiritual realizations.

In Tibet, the events on the first day of any project or work that we might undertake are considered extremely important as a sign of how the entire effort itself is going to go. If we make an error, says the Rinpoche, in how we act on the first day with our Teacher, then it will carry with us through the entire period to the 15th of the month—a reference to the crucial and auspicious period of a lunar month where the moon is going from black (new) to full.]

2) Thinking about *why* we want to do something helps us get down to it: “What will this do for me?” What are the three effects that we can expect from studying the three great groups of the Buddhist teachings?

[In approaching his explanation of what proper study can do for our lives, Pabongka Rinpoche wants us first to consider the benefits of spiritual study. He presents these benefits with regard to the traditional Three Baskets of the Buddhist scriptures (the Tripitaka). These three are the

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Basket of Vowed Morality (Vinaya); the Basket of Sutra (Sutra); and the Basket of Higher Knowledge (Abhidharma).

Through the study of vowed morality, he says, we master the training of ethical living; that is, we learn the types of actions which we need to avoid if we want to be happy and successful. By studying the Basket of Sutra, we perfect the training of single-pointed meditation, and learn to avoid distraction of all kinds.

With a study of higher knowledge, we gain an insight into where everything in the world comes from; this enables us to end all our negative emotions, and thus reach nirvana.

To put it in real-life language, the teachings on the steps of the path to enlightenment give us a strong, clear ethical framework for conducting our life. Because of the good karma we make by living in this framework, our ability to focus our mind automatically increases far beyond anything it was before.

This deep focus allows us to gain insights into reality that we could never have had otherwise. We are able to see where the world and the people around us are actually coming from—our own seeds—and this gives us the power to create a perfect world, for ourselves and others.]

3) Explain the benefits of studying the Dharma, in terms of the metaphors of darkness and of wealth.

[Pabongka Rinpoche gives a beautiful metaphor for the benefits of learning the steps of the path, first asking us to imagine all around us little patches of darkness: the things that we could know, but don't know yet. We could think of these as the words of a foreign language being spoken by people at the next table in the coffee shop; as the details of how a solar panel works, something that would be great to know if we wanted to help others; or little spots of darkness which mar our understanding of emptiness.

Every time we learn *anything* new then, we eliminate one more patch of the darkness within our own mind, and expand the light there. By studying the nature of reality especially, we develop an ability to spread the light of

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understanding to our entire mind and life, since this one special light has the power to spread by itself, removing entire stretches of darkness.

The Rinpoche also gives a wonderful metaphor for how the learning that we gain with the study of the scriptures is like a new kind of wealth for us. Any other kind of wealth that we might amass—property, money, possessions—can be stolen by others; knowledge though is the most precious of possessions, living quietly within our own mind and beyond the reach of others to take away.

If we need to leave our current situation, even on a moment's notice, learning is also something which we can take with us simply as we step out of the door—no packing, no trouble. And very importantly, spiritual knowledge is finally something that we can carry with us on to the next life, even as we leave this present physical body.]

4) Pabongka Rinpoche notes that learning makes a huge difference even just in how we understand the Three Jewels, in the most basic practice of Buddhism: taking refuge. Explain, in the context of seeking more passion in our work and our relationship.

[It is said that the act of taking refuge in the Three Jewels is what makes a person a Buddhist. Those who have not had the opportunity of good training in the great ideas of Buddhism might think of the Three Jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—as being what we call the “deceptive” or “only apparent” forms: pictures or statues of Enlightened Beings; the physical books or teachings of the Dharma; and those who dress in the robes of a Buddhist nun or monk.

Those who have undergone such training know that the “real” Buddha Jewel consists of the realizations in the mind of an Enlightened Being, and especially their knowledge of emptiness and seeds: the source of all things. They know that the real Dharma Jewel is made of the direct perception of emptiness in the mind of any being, enlightened or not yet enlightened; and that the real Jewel of the Sangha, or Community, consists of all those living creatures who have already had this experience of the direct perception of emptiness.

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We can even say then that the *ability* to be a Buddhist hinges upon some serious training in the idea of seeds, and the emptiness which allows these seeds a place to manifest. And this is just one example that Pabongka Rinpoche gives out of countless examples of the importance of learning in this particular spiritual tradition.

We can immediately apply this description of what it means to take refuge to our search for more passion in our life: in our career, and in our relationships. If we do lack this kind of passion, we don't need in this spiritual path to go and sit in front of a statue of the Buddha and ask them to give it to us.

Rather, we can take refuge by going to Starbucks! That is, if we want passion in our life then we have to help someone else find the passion in *their* life. We think of someone we know who's bored with their job or their marriage, and we ask them if they want to go out to Starbucks with us and just talk their issues over—I'll be a good listener, I'll give you some support here.

The seeds that we plant by helping our friend at Starbucks then ripen into a renewed passion in our own life. We have just taken real refuge in the Three Jewels—in the high ideas of seeds and emptiness, and in the beings who spread this knowledge in the universe—and this has provided us the very real shelter that we sought.]

5) Describe the metaphor of the beds and the clothes, and explain how it might apply to ourselves.

[Pabongka Rinpoche stresses that we must gain a balanced understanding of *all* of the steps of the path—of all the lam-rims. He states that, in our spiritual journey, we will need every one of these steps, and we will need an equally deep understanding of each of them.

In our own present context, we might be more attracted for example to the finer points of the steps which treat the idea of emptiness, or the deep ideas of the secret teachings, and not go into such detail on the vows of an ethical life, or the advices on developing kindness, which are completely necessary for developing the first two successfully. And what Pabongka Rinpoche is

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saying is that we have to gain equal depth in each of these steps, if we are to reach our goals.

He says that otherwise we will be like a person with a big walk-in closet full of expensive clothes, but who doesn't have a bed—or a person with a dozen beds, but only one set of clothes. Best that we have something of everything, whether it be a simple monk's cell outfitted with everything they need for their practice, or a rich man's mansion with everything that they need for their more expensive lifestyle. That is, we need at minimum a basic training in *all* the steps, and ideally a thorough training—but again in *all* of them.]

6) What are the “three problems of the pot” for a student, and what is one way each that we can avoid these three?

[The “three problems of the pot” refer to typical problems with how we study from our Teacher. The first is to be like a pot which is turned upside down. This refers to sitting in the Dharma class but failing to listen closely; rather, our mind is wandering off to other places and thoughts. We can avoid this problem, says the Rinpoche, if we act like a deer.

It is said in the Tibetan tradition that deer are incredibly attracted to beautiful sounds: if you sing a song to a deer, they will listen so closely that you can pull out a bow and arrow as you sing and shoot them before they're really aware of what's going on. We should be the same: totally engrossed in the teaching as it's going on, listening with all our ears and heart.

The second problem of the pot is to turn the pot right side up—that is, we listen closely to the teaching—but as a vessel for the teaching we are already filled with filth, or even poison. That is, some of us may come to a teaching simply so that—as we learn more—the people around us will be more impressed with the amount that we know.

Others might come not with the hope that they learn something which could make them a better person, but only with the intention of having something new to present in the next class that they teach. If even the motivation to reach happiness for oneself alone—rather than a vision for an entire globe of happy people—is insufficient motivation for hearing these teachings on the steps, then obviously these intentions make us like a pot

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already filled with unclean things. The fix then is to hold the mentioned vision as we listen carefully.

The third problem of the pot is to turn the pot right side up and avoid anything impure in it, but simply to find ourselves unable to retain anything that we learn—much like a pot that has a hole in the bottom as we try to fill it up with some delicious beverage.

The solution here is to review what we have learned in the class: tradition calls for reviewing whatever we learn at least once on the day that we learn it, and then twice more before the next teaching session. *An extremely important point* mentioned by the Rinpoche here is how very helpful it is to review with other participants in the same class. See below!]

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Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, meditating on the three different problems of the pot; which of the three you might need to work on; and how you plan to work on it. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations: