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A Gift of Liberation
Course One—Perfect Stillness
Class One: A Plan for Enlightenment

1) What is the name of the book that we will be using for our trip to enlightenment? Who wrote it, and what are his dates? How has it come down to us?

[The name of the book that we will be studying is *A Gift of Liberation, Thrust into Our Hands.* In Tibetan, this is *Namdrul Lakchang.* The book belongs to the *lam-rim* genre of Buddhist literature, or a presentation on the *steps of the path* to enlightenment.

The text is about 800 pages long, and is a record of a teaching given in the area of Lhasa, Tibet, by Pabongka Rinpoche (1878-1941). It was delivered over a period of 24 days in 1921, as a public lecture to over 700 people. In the audience was Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche (1901-1981), who later became one of the two tutors of His Holiness the present Dalai Lama. He was the heart disciple of Pabongka Rinpoche, and made a careful written record of the teachings.

Trijang Rinpoche spent many years perfecting this record, under the guidance of Pabongka Rinpoche. He then taught it to Khen Rinpoche Geshe Lobsang Tharchin (1921-2004), who in turn taught it to Geshe Michael Roach over a period of more than 20 years.]

2) What is the general outline and strategy that we will be using for our study of this book?

[*A Gift of Liberation* is presented in the classical style of a Buddhist teaching on the steps of the path to enlightenment. That is, it is broadly divided into the steps or spiritual practices undertaken by practitioners of a lower, a

medium, and a higher capacity. These levels are distinguished, respectively, by a wish to escape a birth in the realms of misery after we die; to escape a birth in any realm of pain; and to reach total enlightenment, bringing all other beings to this state as well.

The core of the steps of the path for those of higher capacity is composed of the six perfections. The last two of these are perfect meditation and a deep insight into nature of reality.

In this series of courses—which is expected to take about 10 years—we will first undertake a study of these last two perfections. This is so that we can then continue in the traditional order of the steps with the ability to apply stillness and wisdom to each of the steps. In the case of a death meditation, for example, we will not just meditate upon our coming death, but examine the emptiness of our mortality—which will allow us in fact to overcome death itself.

After this, we will continue through the normal steps, for each of the three types of practitioner. As we reach the end of these steps and return to the last two of the perfections, we will turn to the presentation of these two in *The Great Book on the Steps of the Path:* the *Lam Rim Chenmo* of Je Tsongkapa (1347-1419), teacher of His Holiness the First Dalai Lama.

This section itself subsumes over 400 pages and is considered one of the most important treatments on meditation and emptiness ever written.

We will be studying this text in a tradition known as *nyam-tri*, or experiential teaching. That is, we will study a major section together over a period of ten days; pause for a month or two in order to digest what we've learned, and then take a silent group retreat for ten days in order to gain an actual meditative experience of the subject being taught.]

3) What is the primary goal of learning to meditate, and what metaphor does Pabongka Rinpoche use to illustrate it?

[If we are able to bring the mind to a state of complete stillness, then it will be clear enough to experience ultimate reality directly. This experience has a unique power for clearing away our mental afflictions: anger, jealousy, and

all the rest. And then it takes us further, to the state of complete enlightenment, where our body and mind transform in such a way that we become able to care for countless suffering living beings, all at the same time.

Pabongka Rinpoche illustrates these two with the metaphor of using a butter lamp in order to see a religious wall painting in a dark place like an unlit temple or cave. The butter lamp is our wisdom, seeking to understand how things really work. The flame of the lamp must be completely still and unmoving, unshaken by drafts or wind—and so must our mind be, if we wish to see emptiness.]

4) What are the six helpful conditions that we need if we hope to develop an ability to meditate deeply?

[The six conditions are:

(a) Meditating in a place which is conducive to deep states of meditation. This involves being a place where we can easily find the material needs we have during periods of deep practice; meditating where holy beings have practiced before; in a place which is neither excessively hot nor cold, but rather which is healthy; meditating together with good dharma friends; and having all the different training that we need to succeed.

(b) Keeping our wants few.

(c) Cultivating a sense of contentment for what we have.

(d) Avoiding too much busy-ness and overstimulation.

(e) Living a good and ethical life.

(f) Giving up a lot of random thoughts like thinking about things we want.]

5) What did His Holiness the Fifth Dalai Lama say about "sticking together with a second shadow"; how has this been interpreted wrongly, and how

does the correct interpretation impact upon our plans for an "experiential teaching" of this text over the coming years?

["Sticking together with a second shadow" is advise from His Holiness the Fifth Dalai Lama that we meditate together with a close friend, who has exactly the same spiritual goals as we do, and moves through spiritual activities like meditation with us as automatically and smoothly as our own shadow follows us. Pabongka Rinpoche in fact recommends meditating in a group, of at least 3 people.

Some practitioners of the past have mistaken this quotation by the Great Fifth to mean that we should have no other companions than our own shadow—which is to say, we should meditate alone. But, as we are going to be doing in our lam-rim retreats together in this series of teachings, it is considered superior in this tradition to practice together with a few hard-core spiritual friends.]

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 how you plan to assemble the six conditions for good meditation in your own life and home. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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A Gift of Liberation
Course One—Perfect Stillness
Class Two: The Same as High School

1) What are the five problems that—according to the coming Buddha, Maitreya—we are likely to encounter as we progress in our meditation practice? What special way will we be using to learn about these five, and their eight antidotes?

[Lord Maitreya, in his teaching entitled *Learning to Tell the Extremes from the Middle*, lists these five problems as:

(a) Not feeling like meditating.

(b) "Forgetting the instructions," which here means losing the object of our meditation.

(c) Mental dullness and mental agitation.

(d) Failing to take action when a problem arises.

(e) Taking action when it is not necessary.

To learn about these five problems and their eight antidotes, we will be using a special, illustrated meditation chart which was put together by Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, who is the Heart Lama of both Khen Rinpoche and His Holiness the Dalai Lama—and who masterfully edited our text.]

2) What advice does Pabongka Rinpoche, following a special warning by Je Tsongkapa in his *Great Book on the Steps to the Path*, give with regard to the sources that we rely upon for learning how to meditate?

[Pabongka Rinpoche states that, in learning how to meditate, we should rely upon the great classics, written over the last 25 centuries, which describe how to do this practice properly. He lists for example important presentations on emptiness such as the Five Books of Maitreya; writings of Master Asanga, who saw emptiness directly; and the *Steps of Meditation* by Master Kamalashila.

Pabongka Rinpoche says that we should learn to put these great books into actual use in our daily practice, and not think of them as some grand theoretical presentations. He refers us to some versed comments by Je Tsongkapa himself in the "granddaddy" of all great lam-rim texts, where the Master states that we should not go looking for instructions in meditation in places where they don't exist—that is, in strange little books or instructions which are pretty much made up by individuals with little formal training—but rather take ourselves to the texts that are the result of many centuries of refinement and experience, all under the guidance of a qualified, living Teacher.

He notes that Je Tsongkapa himself based his practice and life on the great teachings from ancient India, and upon the guidance of his own Lama, the Angel of Wisdom: Manjushri. And Pabongka Rinpoche concludes by saying that if we don't rely on an authentic meditation instruction, we will fail to make much progress, even after many years of trying.]

3) What are the four traditional antidotes for not feeling like meditating? Please give some detail on the first, and explain all four with a high-school metaphor.

[The four traditional antidotes for the first typical meditation problem—not feeling like meditating—are the following:

(a) Admiration for the practice. This comes from taking time to consider the great things that will come to us if we meditate, and can be compared to sitting in a high-school class and contemplating all the cool things about a boy or girl in the next row. Some of these great things are described by Pabongka Rinpoche at this point:

- ❖ we will avoid the problems of a distracted state of mind, which will ruin our spiritual practice;

- ❖ we can apply our mind firmly to whatever virtuous project or practice we choose

- ❖ we get faster results from these undertakings because of this firmness of mind;

- ❖ we even find ourselves attaining clairvoyance and other miraculous powers;

- ❖ our sleep itself turns to deep meditation;

- ❖ our mental afflictions noticeably lose their strength; and

- ❖ most importantly, because we have a good ability to meditate we are able to quickly and strongly achieve all the steps of the path to enlightenment that we are about to undertake with the guidance of this text.

(b) A yearning to learn to meditate. Because we've been thinking about the boy or girl's cool qualities—that is, because we've taken the time to think a lot about how many amazing things are going to happen to us if we learn to meditate well—then we begin to feel a yearning or inspiration to get to know them: to try to learn to meditate.

(c) Going for it!: that is, working hard to get what we want. Trying to bump into him or her in the hallways, lunch lines, at the lockers, etc, and getting to talk to them; which here means getting down on our cushion every day and working hard & steady to improve our meditation.

(d) Getting good at it! Through persistent and steady effort, we get to know them and go out on a lot of dates and get close to each other—that is, we start to feel great both mentally and physically when we meditate, because we're doing our practice regularly and getting good at it.]

4) When Pabongka Rinpoche discusses the second problem of meditation, he takes the opportunity to describe our different choices in meditation objects, and why some are not so powerful. Explain, making reference also to a metaphor for keeping our mind on the object of meditation.

[The second potential problem during meditation is of course losing the object of meditation altogether, even though technically this is called "forgetting the instructions." To have this occur at all, we need to have chosen a suitable object of meditation, and must have set our mind on it.

This itself is compared to trying to tie a wild elephant up to a pillar—the comparison is obvious. We try to use our awareness to hold the mind to the object we've chosen, as if we are tying up an elephant to it, and try to keep it there.

Pabongka Rinpoche takes this opportunity to discuss what we should choose for our meditation object. He says that, first of all, a person can develop meditative concentration by using just about anything as an object. He mentions other ancient schools of India where practitioners meditated, for example, on the mental image of a small stone, or piece of wood; and an ancient Tibetan tradition—the Bonpo—which advised focusing on the mental image of a Sanskrit letter *ah*.

The Rinpoche then mentions a tradition where followers actually stared at an outside physical object (as we see in some Indian yoga traditions), which he describes as "even worse" than the preceding, since this loses the goal of developing concentration within the mind.

In describing the object which our own school uses to develop meditative concentration, Pabongka Rinpoche states that Je Tsongkapa himself recommended focusing on a mental image of an Enlightened Being. Because the object itself is especially sacred—as opposed to a rock or, for example, just our breath—then the very act of concentration plants powerful good karmic seeds in the mind, and removes old negative seeds. It also prepares us for the higher practices where we practice seeing ourselves and everything around us as divine. He also mentions practices of focusing on a dagger shape within the inner body, and also the Mahamudra or Great Seal practice of focusing on our own mind.]

5) How does Pabongka Rinpoche describe the difference between heaviness, gross dullness, and subtle dullness? What might result if we mistake the last for real meditation?

[The Rinpoche describes "heaviness" as a feeling that our body and our mind are weighted down, and that we are just about to fall asleep; this state of mind itself could be either non-virtuous or neutral, but it leads to dullness, and to non-virtuous acts.

Gross dullness is where we are managing to maintain our hold on the object—we have fixation on it, but the mind is not bright and fresh. Subtle dullness is where we have both fixation and freshness, but there is no intensity: it's as if we were holding a cup loosely, but not firmly.

Because thought here is fixation and freshness, there is a very great danger that we will mistake subtle dullness for a good meditation, and possibly stay in this state for years of meditation practice. The Rinpoche states that the continued bad habit of subtle dullness has the accumulative effect of making us "spaced out," lacking any clarity in our intellect—he says that essentially it is a "sadhana" or "practice for reaching" rebirth as a dull sort of animal.]

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 the reasons why you want to learn to meditate well. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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A Gift of Liberation
Course One—Perfect Stillness
Class Three: The Steering Wheel

1) How does Pabongka Rinpoche describe the meditation obstacle of restlessness? How is it distinguished from distraction, and why?

[Restlessness, the opposite extreme of dullness in meditation, is a state of mind where our thoughts are distracted to something that we find attractive or desirable. Pabongka Rinpoche gives the example of attending a theatrical performance during the day, and then trying to meditate that evening. Our mind keeps wandering off to how nice the leading actor or actress was.

Restlessness is differentiated from distraction, which is defined as the mind wandering off the meditation object and onto something we find unattractive—say, for example, a person who is causing us trouble nowadays—or even wandering off to virtuous objects which are other than what we're supposed to be meditating on at the moment.

Both of these habits function to disturb our meditation, but the first is considered more dangerous because thoughts of desire are simply so much more numerous than other types, and pops up in the mind so much more easily.]

2) How is gross restlessness distinguished from subtle restlessness?

[Gross restlessness is where our attraction to some other object is so strong that we lose our object of meditation completely. Subtle restlessness is where there is an undercurrent of attraction to something running just below the surface of our conscious thoughts—it is described as being like a

stream flowing under the frozen surface. We are just about to think about what we want for lunch.]

3) What is the antidote which we apply when we feel dullness or restlessness, and why is it not exactly an antidote?

[The antidote for dullness or restlessness, which together are the third of the five meditation obstacles, is watchfulness. This is where we reserve a corner of our mind to watch the rest of our mind as it meditates, and to ring the alarm in the event that it detects either dullness or restlessness. Note that we are only ringing the alarm at this point; we are not actually fixing the problem, so that in a sense watchfulness is only a pre-antidote.]

4) What is the fourth of the five potential problems in our meditation? What are some forms that its antidote might take when we have mental dullness, and how does applying the antidote resemble driving a car?

[The fourth classical problem is not taking action right away when we detect that our mind in meditation is getting either dull or restless. The antidote for this is obviously simply to take action. Different actions are called for depending on whether we have dullness or restlessness.

In the case of subtle dullness, the mind is described as "slightly depressed." And so we have to bring it up. Here we don't need to break our meditation session, or even switch to a different object. Rather we simply tighten down slightly on the object—if we tighten too much, we precipitate restlessness.

In practice this becomes a bit like driving a car. We find the car drifting a bit to the left (subtle dullness), so we tighten down a bit. We usually tighten a little too much, which then brings us to restlessness, and so we lighten up to return to center.

If we detect gross dullness—where we are seriously losing any fresh feeling of the mind—we need to correct for what the texts call "overconstricting" the mind. We try to open up the mind a bit and, if this doesn't work, then

we drop the object altogether and try to think of something that would cheer up the mind; for example, we could think about how lucky we are to have this path to follow, as opposed to the millions of people who lack such an opportunity. This we make us begin to feel special, and happy, and blocks the dullness. Other options are to bring to mind an especially radiant object, or else we could do the "giving" part of *tonglen* (giving and taking) to bring joy and light to the mind.

If we tend towards dullness in our meditation, then between sessions we can undertake activities to refresh the mind, such as walking or being out in nature.]

5) What are some antidotes which we can apply in the case of either subtle or gross restlessness?

[In the case of subtle restlessness, we haven't yet lost the object, and we are meditating a little too tightly. And so the antidote at this point is to relax or release the mind a touch.

If this doesn't help, then we have gross restlessness. We don't have to quite our meditation session; we can just bring the mind down a bit by thinking about death, or the suffering of the world. In an extreme case we can simply go to watching our breath to bring the mind down.]

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 trying to bring on an imaginary state of subtle dullness in your own mind, and then trying to fix it with the proper antidote. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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A Gift of Liberation
Course One—Perfect Stillness
Master, Class Four: When to Let Go

1) Pabongka Rinpoche notes that many masters of ancient times have advised us to "let go" into the meditation. What is it that we "let go," and what is the proper point at which we let go?

[The main thing that we are advised to let go at this point is our watchful state of mind—and that only when we have reached the eighth state of mind: the point at which both dullness and restlessness have stopped. Because they have stopped, there is no longer any need to exert ourselves to apply an antidote to prevent them—and thus the application of this antidote would itself become a distraction. That is, we can "let go" of our watchful state of mind, because what it would watch for is already gone.

This "letting go" is something therefore that should only be done when we have reached the final stages of the eighth state: it is true that the advice to "let go" has been offered by many great Masters of the past, but *only* with regard to his point, where there is no longer any dullness or restlessness to watch out for.

It's not just our watchful state of mind that we could be "letting go." Pabongka Rinpoche also mentions letting go of our awareness, or loosening up completely on the rope that we have tied on the object of our meditation. He also says that we can let up even on the intensity with which we hold the object.]

2) What are the seven components of the Meditation Posture of Vairochana? What is an eighth component which is sometimes added?

[Lama Quicksilver lists the seven components in an abbreviated way as "The (1) legs, (2) the eyes, (3) the body, (4) the shoulders, (5) the head, (6) the teeth, and (7) the tongue." He then explains them as follows:

(1) The legs are best placed in a comfortable, cross-legged position; most desirable is the full lotus, so long as this in not painful and thus distracting for us.

(2) The eyes should be left loosely unfocused at the plane of the nose.

(3) The body—here meaning the back—should be kept completely straight.

(4) The shoulders should be level, with the hands in the traditional mudra or gesture of meditation: left hand down first, palm up, right hand atop that, palm up, thumbs lightly touching.

(5) The head should be looking straight ahead, not tilted back or bent down.

(6) The teeth and lips should be left loosely in their natural position.

(7) The tongue should be lightly touching the upper palate.

The eighth component which is sometimes added is watching the breath to bring the mind to neutral at the beginning of the meditation.]

3) In the Mahamudra tradition of meditation, the object of meditation is our mind itself. What are the two ways, in this system of meditation, for blocking an unwanted random thought from the mind?

[One way of blocking a random thought, in the Mahamudra tradition, is to focus on the thought itself and explore what its real nature is. This would

apply for example to subtle dullness in the mind. We would focus on the dullness *itself* as our meditation, and explore where it has really come from—its karmic seeds: the unkind thing that we did to someone else which may have caused this dullness. This could be for example keeping someone else up late gossiping, and preventing them from having a good practice at their usually scheduled time the next morning.

The second method, which ultimately is not as powerful, would be to apply the traditional antidote for this problem of the five; for example, uplifting our heart by thinking how special we are, among all the people in the world, to have the opportunity to learn to meditate properly.]

4) Pabongka Rinpoche mentions a phenomenon where, as we first learn to meditate, it feels as if our mind is getting substantially worse. How does he explain this?

[The Rinpoche says that, until we start to learn to meditate, we are simply not aware of how distracted our mind is. When we do start meditating, and we "turn on" our watchful state of mind, suddenly we are aware of all the dullness and restlessness we have always had in our mind, and we think our mind is worse than before we started meditating. If we're aware of this phenomenon it can keep us from feeling discouraged.]

5) What is it which separates each of the eight states from the preceding?

[We can understand the eight states of mind more clearly if we can remember what it is that distinguishes each state from the one before it:

- What separates the first and second states of mind from each other is that the mind stays on the object for either a shorter or a longer length of time.

- ❖ What separates the second and the third states of mind is that our wandering away from the object is longer or shorter.

- ❖ What separates the third and the fourth states of mind is whether or not it is even possible for us to lose the object of our meditation.

- ❖ What separates the fourth and the fifth states of mind is whether or not we get obvious dullness.

- ❖ What separates the fifth and sixth states of mind is whether or not we still need to watch carefully for subtle dullness. Furthermore, subtle restlessness is also less at the sixth state.

- ❖ What separates the sixth and the seventh states of mind is whether or not we need to be very aware of any danger of losing ourselves in subtle dullness.

- ❖ What separates the seventh and eighth states of mind is whether or not we have any dullness or restlessness at all.

- ❖ What separates the eighth and ninth states is whether or not we have to exert any effort at all.]

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 what it would feel like to pass through the eight stages, dropping a particular problem at each of them. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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A Gift of Liberation
Course One—Perfect Stillness
Master, Class Six: A Great Lineage

1) What are the two great divisions of Pabongka Rinpoche's discussion of emptiness, and why is the split made this way? What further division is made of the first of these two, and what difference does it reflect?

[Pabongka Rinpoche discusses emptiness in two great sections: the fact that a person is not themselves, and the fact that the parts of a person are not themselves. It is said that, when we first perceive emptiness directly, we see our own personal emptiness: the first emptiness that Mike ever sees directly is the fact that Mike is not Mike—that is, Mike is not the person that Mike thought he was. And then later on Mike can apply what he's learned about Mike to the parts of Mike: Mike's mind, Mike's body, and even the world of which Mike is a part.

It's said as well that when we are first learning about emptiness in an intellectual way, we do better if we deal first with the emptiness of some object other than ourselves—for example, with a metal pot that we use on the stove. This is because we are too "close" to ourselves on a day-to-day basis to really be objective when we examine who we are: we spend too much of every single day taking care of ourselves—we comb our hair tens of thousands of times in a life, and not someone else's.

Our study of how we are different than what we always thought we were is itself divided into two parts. The first concerns getting to the point where we directly perceive our own emptiness within a state of perfect meditation—the first time this happens, it might take for example only 20 minutes. And then in what is called the "aftermath," which may continue on and off for the next 24 hours, we reach a higher intellectual understanding of the emptiness of both ourselves and other objects, along with other high realizations triggered by the direct experience of emptiness earlier.]

2) Explain the metaphor of the two wings without which a bird cannot fly.

[It's fun to picture a mythical eagle like a Phoenix flying gracefully through the sky, and then to consider what they would look like if they had only a single wing, and not two. They would be on the ground fluttering in a circle.

Our journey to enlightenment is described as being the same. We will need two wings: one which is called "method," and one which is called "wisdom." We can think of "method" as the actions that we take to help others, and the love which inspires these actions. A classical example of one of these actions would be the patience that we demonstrate for people who irritate us—perhaps someone around us who is always complaining.

This patience can be felt either with or without an understanding of where the complaining person in our life is coming from. If we simply force ourselves to be patient and to suppress our anger, this patience will sooner or later break down, when the complaining gets bad enough.

If however we have an understanding of the deeper nature of the person who irritates us, then our patience simply tightens down harder the more they complain. This is because we have reached an intimate understanding of how their complaining is, in fact, coming from ourselves. The more they complain, the more we examine our own life and try to detect moments in the day when we ourselves are complaining. The worse they become, the better we become: we are not only being patient, we are being patient with understanding—two wings instead of just one.]

3) What is it which can "tear the very fabric" of the cycle of pain?

[Pabongka Rinpoche, following ancient masters such as Aryadeva, reminds us that no more than *suspecting* that—for example—the complaining person in our life is actually coming from us is enough to start an irreversible tear in the very fabric of our suffering reality. Once someone has given us a convincing argument for how we plant the seeds for a complaining person in our life by indulging in complaining ourselves—an argument for proving

why complaining people in our life are actually coming from our own complaining—then we will be "cursed": we will never be the same. We can never completely blame others: we have put a lasting tear in the fabric of our pain.]

4) Pabongka Rinpoche mentions that Lord Buddha in ancient times taught different versions of emptiness, some of which even seem to be contradictory. What unique feature does he mention about the highest of these different versions?

[The highest of all the different versions of emptiness which Lord Buddha taught is that which has been passed down through the Consequence (Prasangika) group within the Middle Way school. Pabongka Rinpoche describes the unique feature of this school as being their understanding of the relationship between dependent origination and emptiness.

"Dependent origination" in this context refers to the fact that our mind overlays pictures over pieces of objects, unifying them into the things around us at any given time. These pictures are born from seeds which we have planted in our own mind by the way that we have treated others in our life.

That is, the world around us is like a blank white screen—this is the real meaning of emptiness. The pictures that come out of seeds in our mind are projected onto this empty screen, and we make objects out of random clues of objects. This helps us picture correctly the relationship between dependent origination and emptiness: pictures projected onto a white screen. In a very real sense then, the essence of the pictures is provided by the screen, and the point of the screen is provided by the pictures: each defines the other. They are different sides of the same coin.]

5) Who are the three great figures in our lineage of the teachings on emptiness? When did they live, and what is one great text that each of them wrote about emptiness?

[Here are the names, dates, and great texts on emptiness composed by the three great figures of our emptiness lineage:

(1) Arya Nagarjuna, who lived about 200 AD and who is renowned to have perceived emptiness directly (thus the name "arya," which refers to a person who has accomplished this). His *Root Text on Wisdom* is a masterpiece of brevity and final insight which revived the teachings of Lord Buddha on emptiness and has lasted to this day.

(2) Master Chandrakirti, who lived about 650 AD and whose most famous work on emptiness is *Entering the Middle Way*, an explanation of Arya Nagarjuna's *Root Text* which cleaned up misunderstandings about the masterpiece which had crept in over time. This work has been the basis of the teachings on emptiness throughout Tibet for the last thousand years.

(3) Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419), the teacher of His Holiness the First Dalai Lama and grandfather of the lineage of the Dalai Lamas, wrote *Illumination of the True Thought*, a massive work which explains, in perfect detail, the meaning of Master Chandrakirti's work, and thus Arya Nagarjuna's. This is the basis of the presentation which Je Tsongkapa gave in his own masterpiece on the steps of the path, and thus the basis of our own here in this text.]

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, picturing the eyes of the holy being who sits in front of you during your meditation. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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A Gift of Liberation
Course One—Perfect Stillness
Master, Class Seven: Three Me's

1) One of the classical proofs that Pabongka Rinpoche mentions in support of the idea of emptiness is called the "Reasoning of the Seven Choices." What is the basic paradox that this reasoning is built upon, and how does that apply to emptiness in a variety of ways?

[The basic paradox here is that we cannot recognize what an object is unless our eyes first scan the area of the object to detect a number of details that would serve to identify an object.

In the case of a pot on a stove, for example, we would need to see one thing suggesting a handle, another suggesting the circular top of the pot, and another suggesting the bottom of the pot, before we could identify the object as a pot. Our eyes would have to jump from indicator to indicator until we had seen enough to make a determination.

If we are looking at the parts though we cannot look at the whole, and so we cannot really say that we are seeing a pot. Something happens within the mind to make us think we are seeing a whole pot, when in reality we are not. The mind chooses—arbitrarily, in a way—to "lump" suggestions that we get into a discrete object.

We could just as well have made a different object, say which included parts of the pot and parts of the stove below it. Something in our mind though has compelled us to synthesize a pot. We are actually observing a tiny image of a pot in the back of our mind, overlaid upon the indicators which we saw.

This tiny image is produced when a karmic seed opens in the mind. This seed was created when—at some time in the past—we for example cooked a meal for someone else who was hungry. It thus opens as the image of a pot, which we place over the indicators that we have detected.]

2) What is the meaning of the Tibetan word gakja? What famous advice does Master Shantideva give us about it, and how can we carry out this advice in our actual life?

[The word gakja means "that which is to be denied" or cancelled; that is, the thing which emptiness is empty of. It's important to remember that this is a "thing" which never did exist, never will, and never could: something like a two-headed purple elephant.

Master Shantideva says, in a very famous quotation—

Until we encounter
The thing that emptiness
Is empty of

We will never be able
To understand
How it never existed at all.

We are surrounded constantly by things we think we see—by gakjas, and they are what cause our suffering. Say that we have a favorite song; we play it for others and get upset if they don't like it. The degree to which we get upset shows that we are thinking of a favorite song that doesn't exist; that is, one which could come from its own side.

This is the gakja version of the song. The favorite song that really does exist is the one which is coming from us, from having said sweet things to others in the past. And since we realize that this song is coming from us, we don't feel upset if others can't see that it's the best song in the world.

Another example would be when someone blames us for a problem that we had nothing to do with—when someone blames us unjustly. We begin to feel angry, we defend ourselves—we defend a gakja version of ourselves—because we have forgotten that even if we are blamed for something we haven't done we have been blamed justly: we have put the seeds in our mind for being blamed, by blaming someone else.

In summary we can say that every time we feel upset or overly desirous of anything, we are focusing on the gakja or non-existent version of that thing, since we are obviously forgetting that it has come from ourselves.]

3) What are four different phrases used for the idea of emptiness, and what is the flavor of each of them?

[Four different phrases used as the same as "emptiness" are (a) "not real"; (b) "not having any quality of its own"; (c) "not existing from its own side"; and (d) "not self-standing."

"Not real" refers to the fact that objects are not what we thought they were: they are deceptive or false, as opposed to real or true.

"No quality of its own" means that nothing has in it any quality at all: your favorite song has nothing in it that makes it the most beautiful song (if it did, everyone else would hear it that way), or even a song.

Pabongka Rinpoche describes "not existing from its own side" as meaning that the existence of things depends on things other than them; this refers specifically, we know, to the fact that things are being synthesized by our own minds, tying parts of things together into things according to the pictures popping forth from our mental seeds. That is, things are coming from our side.

"Not self-standing" means that the objects in our world cannot stand on their own.]

4) How does Pabongka Rinpoche describe the idea of a "self"? What are three ways of looking at "self" in the sense of "myself"? And what is the extent to which a wrong idea of the self spreads in the world?

[Pabongka Rinpoche quotes a commentary by Master Chandrakirti to the 400 Verses of Master Aryadeva to show that the meaning of "self," in the sense of the gakja, is "something that could exist from its own side, without having to rely upon any other factor; something that could stand of its own accord, without depending or relying upon anything else."

And we know of course that this would ultimately mean something that did not rely upon a projection coming from our mind and forced upon us by seeds from our own past deeds.

Pabongka Rinpoche mentions three different ways that we can view ourselves, or "me."

(1) A person who is familiar with the idea of emptiness does perceive themselves as "me," but realizes that this is a "me" which is projected by the seeds in their mind.

(2) Those who have yet to see emptiness directly but whose views are not infected by any particular school of philosophy perceive a "me" but without distinguishing whether it exists through any nature of its own or not.

(3) A third type of person has consciously asked themselves the question whether or not the "me" is "me" from its own side, and believes that it is—that the way they perceive their own mind and body cannot be coming from them.

Pabongka Rinpoche is careful to say that the misperception of who "myself" is exists within each and every living being, down to insects, and thus causes all the problems that all of us face.]

5) If the things and people around us are all coming from our own mind, how does this affect whether they "work"—whether they do things, or not?

[The question often arises of whether or not things which are a product of our minds can still work—whether for example an aspirin can take away a headache, if it is coming from us. On a beginning level we can say that, yes, things work, even though they are coming from us.

We now know that, for example, the power of an aspirin to take away our headache obviously doesn't lie within the aspirin—if it did, then every time we took an aspirin our headache would go away. We realize then that what imbues the aspirin with this power is the seeds within our own mind: seeds that were planted when we helped someone else who had a headache, before. So despite the fact that the power of the aspirin is coming from our own mind, the aspirin still works.

On a deeper level, as Arya Nagarjuna and Je Tsongkapa are fond of saying, we shouldn't say that things work despite the fact that they are coming from our own minds. Rather, they work because they are coming from our own minds. If an aspirin didn't come from our mind, then it would have to exist out there, on its own. It would always be itself, in the form we currently see it. And then it could never move or change, or cause a change—such as taking away our headache.]

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, mentally practicing the three ways of looking at ourselves, and contemplating on how we go through them at different times of the day. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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A Gift of Liberation
Course One—Perfect Stillness
Master, Class Eight: Milk & Water

1) In discussing how we reach the "deep meditation where things are like empty space," Pabongka Rinpoche has said that we will be working through four different essential ideas. The first was identifying the gakja, or what emptiness is empty of. The second, now discussed, is called "deciding that there is coverage." What does this refer to, and how does it lead into the third and fourth essential ideas?

[The idea of "coverage" here is that we must look for the "me" that we used to think we were in one of two different places, and these two places cover all the possibilities that there are. We need to decide that these are the only two possibilities, because then when we don't find this kind of "me" in either one, we will know that there is no such me at all. (Which of course is not to say that there isn't a different kind of "me" who really does exist.)

The two possibilities here are that—if there does exist a "me" who is coming from their own side, if there is a me in what I see as my mind and body—then it must be either in the parts of me or in the whole of me. There is no other choice. If we don't find "me" in either the parts of me or the whole of me, then we can say that the "me" we used to think is there isn't there.

And we find that there are problems both in thinking that we are in our parts, and that we are in the whole of our parts. These are the third and fourth essential ideas.

Am I "in" my body? What kind of body is that? Can it be affected by other things? If I do yoga, will my body lose weight, and get

stronger? Some people do yoga and do get healthier; others do yoga and hurt themselves.

And so the condition of my body is not an outside thing which is determined by other outside things. It is coming from seeds in my mind, which were planted there when I helped others be healthy in their body. I am not "in" a body which comes from its own side.

Am I then in all the parts of me put together—in my arms, and legs, and thoughts, all together? If any one of these things is not coming from its own side, then neither can all of them together be coming from their own side.

If there is no "me" coming from any one of them, nor from all of them together, then the "me" I sense that I am must be coming from somewhere else—from how I treat others.]

2) What very fundamental problems are raised simply by saying "my mind" or "my body"?

[When we say "my mind" or "my body," we are implicitly saying that there is a "bigger" me who owns or controls this mind or this body.

We need to look into the question of whether this me is something outside the body and mind; is for example the mind something that we say that we own and are outside of, in the way that we say that a book is "mine" when we hold it in our hand?

Or is the mind part and parcel of "me," in the way that the pages are part of the book?

If the first were the case, and there were a "me" outside of my mind—a me to which the mind belonged—then when we had a thought we would have to say "My mind is having a good thought." But we do identify with the mind, and we always say "I am having a good thought."

In this case I am not the one who possesses my mind in the way that I possess a book, for implicitly I am saying that I ***am*** *my mind.*

Suppose on the other hand that I really ***were*** *my mind, and not some larger possessor of that mind. In that case I couldn't say "I am hungry," or "I am cold," since cold and hunger are detected only through the body, and I am only the mind—not some larger possessor of both body and mind.*

So if I am neither of these, how am I someone at all? "Me" is a mental image which is imposed on the combination of my body and mind when seeds go off in my mind. Although I am not just my body or just my mind—nor just my body and my mind lumped together—I ***am*** *in fact the combination of these two with one more important part: the idea that I am that.*

And that idea is forced upon us by how we have treated others. If I have been kind to others and helped them feel good about themselves, for example, then I myself will have a very clear sense of who I am, and a high degree of healthy self-esteem.]

3) In examining whether I am my body and my mind, the question arises of just who it is that goes on when we die. How is this question answered?

[It is a given in the discussion of this question that someone does indeed go on after death, because—to put it simply—there was someone who came into this life from somewhere else.

If I am my body or my mind, then I disappear when I die. Pabongka Rinpoche points out that this raises problems with the well-known law of karma which says that—once a seed is planted in the mind by our doing something to someone else—then that seed ***must*** *eventually open and grow. (Unless of course it is a good seed which has been destroyed through our anger, or a bad seed which we have purposely destroyed by applying the Four Powers.)*

There are billions upon billions of seeds in the mind, and if they simply disappeared with the mind and body when we died, then this would break the law which says that all seeds must come to fruition. And so some kind of "me" must go on. But what is it?

In answering, we have to overcome our natural idea that there is some kind of "me" who owns these seeds. What if, rather, "me" consisted of the very perceptions arising from these seeds? Seeds for perceiving one certain mind and body gradually diminish in their power as they produce that mind and body, and eventually this mind and body die.

But then other seeds within the storehouse of billions open up, producing new perceptions of a different body and mind. And there are even other seeds which produce during this time the perception of a very subtle body and mind, within the death process and the bardo period between lives, to carry the first seeds.]

4) Where does the metaphor of milk and water come in as we discuss the gakja, or the thing that emptiness is empty of?

[It is said in scripture that geese have the ability to stick their beaks into a glass of water and milk mixed together and drink up just the milk, leaving all the water. The image then is carried over to cases where we need to be able to distinguish between two things which are very difficult to tell one from the other.

In our case here, we need to be able to focus on an object—whether it be a song or even just ourselves—and divide the real song or me from the gakja version of each: from the one which we always thought existed but which in truth does not, and where believing that it does exist causes us tremendous suffering.

As an exercise then we can stand in front of a mirror and look at ourselves. Somewhere in front of us is one "me" which really does exist, and another "me" which we think exists but which

doesn't. And the two are mixed together like water and milk. Can we separate them?

There is one me which is flowing from seeds in our mind—which is fluid and completely dependent upon how much good we have been doing towards others. We are lucky to have this "me," because it means that we can make them whomever we want, just by being more and more good. This is the "me" which really does exist.

And then there is a "me" appearing to us, at the very same time, which is solid and fixed and "out there." This "me," since it exists "out there," has also to be served with things which are "out there." This me will be happy if they get more money, or more food, or more attention from someone else. This is not to say that these things are bad, only that if we perceive them as coming from something outside of us we will be sorely disappointed.

In the case of money, it's not that I will get it by competing with others and taking it away from them. Rather, it will flow from the inside: from seeds that I plant in my mind by sharing with others. Since all the actions I can take which help me involve doing good to others—and since doing good to others always makes us feel happy—then we can tell that we are focusing on the non-existent "me" whenever we feel anything except happy.]

5) What advice does Pabongka Rinpoche give us for our meditation during the points where we start to lose the strength of our perception that nothing is coming from itself?

[During a good meditation on emptiness, we will be able to focus our mind upon the absence of the gakja, or anything which could be coming from its own side. At some point though our mind will become a bit tired and we will begin to lose our strong hold on this idea.

In this case, says Pabongka Rinpoche, we need not stop our meditation and get up off our cushion. Rather, we can simply drop

back to thinking about (for example) why a pen is empty. We go carefully through the reasoning slowly, one more time, and when we reach the point where we are understanding that the pen is neither a pen nor a chew toy from its own side, then we can slip back into focusing on its simple emptiness of being, in itself, neither one.]

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, focus on the "me" which does really exist, and then focus on the "me" which doesn't. Alternate between the two, for practice. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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A Gift of Liberation
Course One—Perfect Stillness
Master, Class Nine: Empty Arising

1) After describing emptiness as we experience it directly in deep meditation, Pabongka Rinpoche goes on to speak about the "wisdom of the aftermath, the wisdom of illusion." Explain these two types of wisdom.

[The "aftermath" here refers to a period of extraordinary experiences which begins just after we come down out of the direct experience of emptiness, our ultimate reality. This experience itself takes about 20 minutes and is so powerful that in a relatively very short period of time it catapults us into becoming an Enlightened Being ourselves.

The aftermath period begins while we are still on our meditation cushion, and continues for the entire rest of the day, until we finally go to sleep. During this period we are no longer in a state of meditation, but we do undergo some very amazing experiences, such as a direct experience of ultimate love; the ability to see our future enlightenment; and the capacity to read the minds of others.

One of the most important experiences during the aftermath is an understanding about the nature of the world around us. During the direct experience of emptiness earlier, we are communing with ultimate reality and no longer see things as coming from their own side. During the aftermath, we despite ourselves go back to seeing things as if they are.

Because though of the direct experience of emptiness that we have just been through, we know that the way we are seeing things is wrong. There is a discrepancy between the way things

appear then and how we understand them to really be. And this kind of discrepancy is in fact the meaning of the word "illusion": things are not what they appear to be.

And so the understanding that we are seeing things wrong is here called "the wisdom of the illusion." It's not that things are just an illusion, and are therefore not real, and we don't have to strive to be good. Rather, it just means that we realize in a very deep way that things are not how they appear to be.]

2) Pabongka Rinpoche says that there will come a point where we see that—despite the fact that everything is empty—it still exhibits dependent origination. How does he describe here what dependent origination means, and what are three traditional ways in which we can understand it?

[Pabongka Rinpoche, in this section, refers to the unwieldly-named concept of "dependent origination" simply as "the fact that things do things." Elsewhere (in his commentary upon The Three Principal Paths*) he describes dependent origination in three different ways:*

(1) It is that fact that things come from their causes (but this only applies to created things)

(2) It is the fact that things are composed of their parts (which then also includes uncreated things)

(3) It is the fact that things are projections of the seeds in our mind, planted there by how well we have helped others (the highest version of dependent origination, which ties together emptiness and goodness)]

3) How does Arya Nagarjuna, in his Seventy Verses on Emptiness, *describe the relationship between dependent origination and emptiness? How do we use this in real life?*

[Pabongka Rinpoche quotes the following verse from this work:

> *There is not a single working thing*
> *Which has any nature of its own;*
> *Thus it is that Those Gone to Bliss*
> *Have taught that all these things*
> *Arise in dependence.*

That is, the very fact that things have no nature within them is what allows them to appear one way or the other, depending upon what our seeds project.

In real life this translates to the fact that we can, literally, make whatever we want to happen happen. Suppose we like someone, and they like us, but we would like them to pay more attention to us than they do now.

If this person were not empty, and not paying attention to us were somehow an inherent quality within them, then there would be nothing we could do to change them. If though they are empty, then this means that the way we see them behave is, in actuality, coming from us—and this in fact is what "dependent origination" really means.

And this in turn means that we can change them. First we need to identify the kind of behavior that we need to exhibit towards others to plant the seeds to see the person change. In this case, it would mean identifying a person in our life whom we are not paying as much attention to as they would like, and would be good.

We then pay them this attention, which plants seeds which ripen and send forth an image of the original person paying more attention to us. The image needs an empty screen—an available person—upon which to be projected. If they were not available, then the image would have no place to go: in traditional Buddhist terminology then, it is because things are empty that they have been said, by the Buddhas, to arise in dependence.]

4) How does Lord Buddha, in the Sutra Requested by Anavatapta, dispel the idea that—if things are empty, and therefore like an illusion—then there is no great difference between right and wrong, and no need to struggle to be good?

[Pabongka Rinpoche quotes a verse from this sutra which says,

> *Nothing that is started*
> *By a cause*
> *Ever starts at all;*
> *It has no nature*
> *At all of starting.*
>
> *What we say is empty*
> *Is anything*
> *That starts from a cause.*
>
> *Anyone who understands emptiness*
> *Is a person who is careful.*

The point here is that—if we really understand emptiness—then we understand first of all that nothing has any quality in it. And then secondly we understand that whatever quality we do think we see in an object is coming from us, from how we treat other people. And this in turn of course means that—the better we understand emptiness—the better we have to treat others: the more "careful" we have to be to take good care of others; and certainly not the opposite.]

5) What are the two extremes that we can fall into as we try to understand how it is that things are empty? How, according (unexpectedly) to Je Tsongkapa, can we avoid them?

[One extreme is called "the extreme of saying that things do exist," meaning that we believe that things do exist in the way that they seem to us to exist: as coming from their own side.

The other extreme is "saying that things don't exist," meaning that we think that—if things don't exist from their own side—then they cannot exist at all.

It is said that one of these extremes is avoided by understanding that things are empty, while the other is avoided by understanding that things are coming from seeds in our mind, planted by how we treat others.

At first glance, it would seem that understanding that things are empty should help us avoid the extreme of thinking that things exist the way they appear. And understanding how things come from our seeds should help us avoid the extreme of thinking that things don't exist at all.

Je Tsongkapa though says that, on a deeper level, understanding that things have no nature is what saves us from falling into the extreme of thinking that nothing exists at all. That is, the nature that everything does possess is that they have no nature in them.

And he says that understanding that things come from our seeds prevents us from thinking that they exist in any other way—in and of themselves.]

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, thinking of specific examples in your own life where understanding how others are empty would lead you to treat them with more kindness. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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A Gift of Liberation
Course One—Perfect Stillness
Master, Class Ten: The Emptiness of Emptiness

1) Close to the end of his presentation on emptiness, Pabongka Rinpoche discusses the emptiness of the mind itself. Explain how this works, using the example of the emptiness of depression—which is a very important "real" application of emptiness.

[It's relatively easy to see how a pen is coming not from its own side but rather from us, because of the simple fact that a dog sees it as a chew toy. It's much more difficult to grasp how the mind itself is empty in the same way.

Anyone who has undergone depression for any period of time can appreciate that it is not coming about because we wish it to. Depression is one of those experiences which proves conclusively to us that we are not in current control of our mind. It is, rather, coming from seeds which we have planted in our mind in the past, and which are growing now, each in their own time.

The seeds were planted when we did or said something which caused another person to be sad. When the seeds grow we will feel depressed, even when things in our life are going relatively well; the same fact is demonstrated by the many people in our life whom we can see remain quite cheerful even in the most disturbing circumstances. This in fact is the emptiness of depression—that in the same circumstances someone else might be maintaining good cheer.

If then we hope to overcome a bout of depression, the best remedy is to go out and try to make another person happy—to sit down for example with a friend who is sad and do what we can to

cheer them. This plants a seed which will ripen as the perception that our own mind is bright and happy.]

2) Having covered the emptiness of two of the divisions of all changing things—the emptiness of physical things, and that of mental things—Pabongka Rinpoche goes on to describe the emptiness of concepts, and other objects which are changing but are neither mind nor matter. Here he describes for example the emptiness of time; explain how he does so, and how this same emptiness is reflected in a visit to the dentist's office.

[For discussing the emptiness of time, Pabongka Rinpoche turns to the same "one or many" approach which we have used for example with a car. It is not possible for us to perceive a year without perceiving months, for these are what allow us to recognize a year.

But it's equally obvious that we cannot simultaneously perceive a month and a year, or else the month would be a year. What this means, in short, is that we aren't perceiving time in the way we thought we were. A year is not twelve months from its own side. We see a year in twelve months because of the image of a year coming up in our mind when we focus on a certain number of months. A year could just as well have been ten months; we see it in twelve only because of how we have treated others in the past—if this length of a year seems overly long to us, then perhaps in the past we made others wait for us.

The emptiness of time is reflected as well in a visit to the dentist. Most of us experience time in a dentist's office as passing very slowly: five minutes of the dentist drilling one of our teeth can seem like an eternity. But the same amount of minutes spent with someone whom we really enjoy seems to pass very quickly. The fact then is, obviously, that time itself is coming from the seeds within our own mind, and not from its own side.]

3) Once he has completed his discussion of how changing things are empty, Pabongka Rinpoche goes on to describe how unchanging things are empty—a much more difficult concept. How does he explain the emptiness of space, or place?

[First of all, space—in the sense of place—is an unchanging thing because, whether it is occupied or not, it doesn't itself change. If space were not present in the place occupied by a rose, then the rose would "pop" out of where it is, since there wouldn't be room for it. And we know that this same space still remains there when we move the rose to another location, because we can place a tulip in the space vacated by the rose.

All space or place though does have parts, in the sense of sides: a right and left part of the space, or in the sense of directions: the north, west, south, and east of the space. If the space were the directions, then the west of it would be the east of it, and the sun would rise and set in the same place. If the space were not the directions, then it would be impossible to identify it as space, since we could not establish its extent.

The fact then is that space, like everything else, is a whole synthesized from its parts by our mind, under the influence of the seeds ripening at any given time within the mind. This explains then why different people have widely differing experiences of any one given space: one finding it confining, and another finding it joyfully open.]

4) There is one special unchanging thing which Pabongka Rinpoche takes care to cover, and that is emptiness itself. It's a difficult point to accept, on the one hand, that emptiness is ultimate reality, while on the other hand asserting that it is also empty of any nature of its own. What is one way in which Pabongka Rinpoche explains the emptiness then of emptiness itself?

[Pabongka Rinpoche first takes great pains to list how scripture itself states that emptiness itself is empty; he quotes The Sutra

Requested by Kashyapa and the *Sutra on the Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Verses* saying that this must be the case.

Then he points out that—although all instances of emptiness are equally empty and essentially the same—we can say that there are "parts" of general emptiness in that each object in the universe has its own particular emptiness, emptiness then being (like space) something with parts.

This being the case, we can use our usual reasoning to prove that emptiness can't be what it seems to be. It must have parts, since we couldn't recognize the whole emptiness without observing at least a few of its parts (that is, a few instances of emptiness, such as the fact that the vase and the table are both devoid of coming from their own side).

But when we are looking at the parts (one or two different instances of emptiness) then we cannot see the whole—yet we do. This proves that even when we perceive emptiness we are watching something that is an image synthesized within our own mind and imposed upon a certain number of parts, rather than existing inherently within those parts.

Which is to say, emptiness is empty!]

5) One of the highest goals of spiritual practice is to achieve the union of meditative quietude and a special insight into the nature of reality. Give the Sanskrit names of these two high realizations, and explain how Pabongka Rinpoche describes the union of the two of them.

[The Sanskrit word for "quietude" here is shamatha, and the word for "special insight into reality" is vipashyana (the latter word is corrupted in versions of the Pali to vipassana, and has in some schools been confused with the meditation with which it is linked).

Pabongka Rinpoche begins his description of the union of these two by saying that first we must reach and maintain the nine levels

of meditation which he has spent so much time describing. This brings on the deep physical and mental pleasure (shinjang) of high meditation, but that in itself is not what it means to reach that special insight by using meditation.

We must go further and examine whether we ourselves have any nature of our own. We see that we do not and hold this conclusion in mind even as we use our awareness to assure that we have not fallen into mental dullness or restlessness.

If we feel that we are about to lose the idea or conclusion that we have reached, then we step back to an examination of whether we are our parts or the whole of those parts (independent of mental seeds imposing an image of such a whole). We thus return to the conclusion and hold it.

In time, this transforms into the direct perception of emptiness, the ultimate meaning and goal of the union of quietude and insight.]

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, reviewing Pabongka Rinpoche's description of how to go into the union of quietude and insight, and then actually attempting to get and stay there during meditation. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations: