

A Gift of Liberation

Course Two—Why Are We Alive?

Class One: Why We Do Anything That We Do?

1) As we undertake our second course for Pabongka Rinpoche's *Gift of Liberation*, remember that we started at the end of this record of 24 days of teachings by the Lama. That is, we have completed the sections on meditation and emptiness first, so that we can apply these to the rest of our study and practice of the text. Now we begin to work through the steps of enlightenment from the first day of the teachings. What is the overwhelming theme of this first day, and how does it apply to our everyday life?

2) We know already from the first course that the title of the masterpiece we are studying is *A Gift of Liberation*. But now we get a chance to see the extended title of the work, which is *The Essence of Nectar: Profound Advices, Complete and Utterly Unerring, which Thrust into Our Hands a Gift of Liberation—Personal Instructions which Include the Cream of All the High Words of the Buddha Himself; Notes Taken during Teachings which were Based upon the Lama's Own Experience of the Steps of the Path to Enlightenment, the Cream of All that the Matchless King of the Dharma ever Thought, Deep within His Heart*. Please separate out the important elements of this title and say a few words about each.

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Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Homework, Class One

3) It is traditional, as a Buddhist author begins a work of major importance, to make a formal promise to complete the work, or die trying. How do we see this promise made here at the beginning of the *Gift of Liberation*, and how might we relate to such a promise ourselves?

4) How does Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche carefully honor his commitment to his Heart Teacher even in the way he refers to him? What greater expression of this commitment do we see in the text, and how did Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche's fulfillment of this commitment impact upon the rest of his life?

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Homework, Class One

5) What are 11 things that Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche has to say about the style in which his Heart Lama delivered the teaching of the *Gift of Liberation*? How does this impact on how we ourselves will give our own teachings of this text in the years to come?

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Homework, Class One

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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 things you plan to do today, and examining *why* you are doing them—what you hope to achieve. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:



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Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Class Two: This One Chance

1) How did Pabongka Rinpoche begin his entire teaching? Whom did he quote, and for what purpose?

2) How is the idea of *sansara*, or a self-perpetuating wheel of pain, reflected in our everyday activities?

3) Pabongka Rinpoche, attempting to convince us that the body and mind we are endowed with now are more useful even than a gem that grants ones every wish for things of the world, takes us through a list of goals which we can achieve so long as we still have this body and mind. Name these goals.

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Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Homework, Class Two

4) When we place our thoughts on how fortunate we are to have a body and mind which are so perfect for achieving both our spiritual goals and our immediate life goals, another thought comes almost automatically. Explain, with regard both to this life and the next.

5) So we have an almost automatic progression of thoughts: how lucky I am to have this immediate opportunity of my life, and a feeling of stark emptiness ahead when I think of what might happen to me if I lost it. What is the next thought then that naturally comes into our mind, both in terms of our entire life and of any one event within it?

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Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, meditating on things you plan to do today, and reflecting upon what a fantastic opportunity lies before you. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Class Three: Meeting our Mothers

1) While we proceed through this course and examine what our hopes are as we undertake any small activity in our life, we naturally discover that we are most often wishing to achieve some kind of personal success, whether it be at work or in a relationship. What does Pabongka Rinpoche have to say about these kinds of goals?

2) What disadvantages of success or position does Pabongka Rinpoche describe in relationship to the future of our own mind?

3) Pabongka Rinpoche describes an entire range of sufferings that afflict beings who are reborn in the exalted but temporary realms of the full and partial pleasure beings. But they also apply to ourselves, and our everyday life here in the human realm. Explain.

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Homework, Class Three

4) What does Pabongka Rinpoche have to say about whether these are good times in the world, or bad?

5) How does a sense of responsibility tie into a review of our thoughts as we begin to engage in any activity, such as coming to a teaching?

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 about one activity that you plan to engage in today, and considering how it might help protect you in an unknown future. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Class Four: Sweetening Our Motivation

1) How does Pabongka Rinpoche describe the traditional motivation of our lineage with which to engage in listening to the teachings on the steps of the path? How might people of two different levels raise this motivation, and how can we “sweeten” our motivation?

2) What are three tests that we might look for in determining whether a particular spiritual path is authentic? What role does the teaching on the steps of the path play in achieving enlightenment within a single human life?

3) When did the “lam rim,” or the “teachings on the steps to enlightenment,” begin? What are the two great divisions of the lineage of these steps, and through whom have they passed down to us?

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Master, Class Four

4) What are three different forms in which the teachings on the steps of enlightenment have been passed down in Tibet, and how do these reflect our own courses of study?

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5) Traditionally, when the steps to enlightenment are taught in a large public group in Tibet, the Lama will actually refer to 8 different great classics upon this subject. Give at least the names of the eight (for us, Pabongka Rinpoche's text would be a ninth).

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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 about how you might pass this teaching on; checking and sweetening the motives you might have for doing so. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Homework for Class Five: Your Buddha Seeds

1) Pabongka Rinpoche begins the second day of his teaching by quoting a famous verse from Je Tsongkapa's *Three Principal Paths*:

As far as I am able I'll explain
The essence of all high teachings of the Victors,
The path all their holy children commend,
The entry point for the fortunate seeking freedom.

How does the Rinpoche explain these lines, and how do they relate to our practice of the steps of the path?

2) Why does Pabongka Rinpoche get into the ingredients for Tibetan tea at this point?

3) What are the four great traditional divisions to teaching the steps of the path to enlightenment? What two sources do they relate to, and how might they apply in the context of a modern life?

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Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Homework, Class Five

4) What two scenarios does Pabongka Rinpoche describe for failing in our spiritual quest?

5) How did the name “lam-rim,” or a teaching on the steps of the path, begin in Tibet? What are some different optional names that were current in olden times for this kind of teaching? How are they described by Jamyang Shepay Dorje (1648-1721), the great author of textbooks for Tibet’s Drepung Monastery? How does his description impact on our own practice of the steps?

6) The person who first brought the teachings of the lam-rim to Tibet was Lord Atisha. Tibetan sources date his birth to 982AD; describe the circumstances of his birth, relating it to the birth of Lord Buddha, and to your own birth.

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, contemplating the fact that you were born into greater wealth even than Lord Buddha or Lord Atisha, and must thus possess all the seeds needed to reach your own enlightenment. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Class Six: Inside the Secret Teachings

1) Describe Lord Atisha’s reaction, as a young boy, when he was presented by his parents with the subjects he was to rule. How does Pabongka Rinpoche comment upon this reaction?

2) It is said that, at the tender age of 6, Lord Atisha “already understood how to make the distinction between the inner and the outer.” Pabongka Rinpoche and others state that this is an extraordinary level of understanding; and the Lord himself later remarked that “There are only three people in the world who really understand this point: myself, Naropa, and Shantipa. Naropa is gone [one source says, to the Heaven of the Angel], and I have come to Tibet. [Another source adds here: “Shantipa has passed away.”] And so things in India are bad.” What does this distinction involve, and how can we utilize it on our spiritual journey?

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Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Homework, Class Six

3) At the age of 11, already under pressure from his parents to begin seeking a wife in order to birth and child to continue the royal lineage, Lord Atisha has a vision of a young maiden whose body glows in a sky-blue light. Some texts say this was an emanation of Tara, another says it was the Angel of Diamond. She says to him:

One Man Divine,
You possess high fortune;
Have no desire, no desire.

If you my Warrior
Were ever mired
Here in the swamp of desire,
It would be like an elephant
Sinking into a marsh.

Wouldn't you lose those lovely robes
Of the morality that you wear?

How does Pabongka Rinpoche interpret the first verse here, and how does he relate it to our lives?

4) What subterfuge did Lord Atisha resort to in order to obtain some of his first Dharma teachings? What lesson is there here for us in a modern life?

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Homework, Class Six

5) What secret practice did Lord Atisha follow for 7 years early in his life; how did he learn it, and what was his position at this time? Who assisted him in obtaining the opportunity to do this, and what relationship would his Lamas and practices have with his earlier mastery of the “inner and outer”?

6) What two practices was Lord Atisha strongly directed to follow, in order to make his practice of the secret teachings work?

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, contemplating the relationship between the “inner” and “outer” worlds as described in our classes on this section of the text. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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Course Two—Why Are We Alive?

Homework for Class Seven: Lives for the Teaching

1) What are some of the names that we might see for the Lama who instructed Lord Atisha in the Wish for enlightenment? What does Pabongka Rinpoche have to say about Lord Atisha seeking these instructions so late in his training, and how might this apply to us?

2) Why does Pabongka Rinpoche spend so much time on the historical details of the life of Lord Atisha? How might this apply to ourselves?

3) In the story of Lord Atisha himself, and in that of the Tibetan King named Hla Lama Yeshe U, we read of lives being risked and lost in the search of the Dharma. What message is this meant to give us in our own quest?

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Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Homework, Class Seven

4) Pabongka Rinpoche spends quite some time discussing the outer appearance that Lord Atisha and his disciples maintained both during their voyage to the Isle of Gold and after their arrival. He relates this to one of the direct followers of Lord Buddha, a monk named Ashvajit. Explain, and comment on the unexpected ways in which this teaching might apply to ourselves in our own attempt to attract others to the spiritual path.

5) What is the first thing that Lord Atisha and his disciples did upon landing on the Golden Island after their harrowing 13-month journey across the sea? How does this relate to our own spiritual practice?

6) What gift did Lord Atisha present to Lama Serlingpa upon their first meeting; what does it signify, and how might it relate to our interaction with our own teacher?

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Homework, Class Seven

7) For how many years did Lord Atisha remain at the feet of Lama Serlingpa, in order to learn from him? What event brought these studies to a close, and how does it apply to ourselves?

8) Why was the Tibetan king Hla Lama Yeshe U so desperate to convince Lord Atisha to come and teach in Tibet? What are three ways in which his labor to do so reflects our own current situation?

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, contemplating the three points outlined above in question #8, and how they apply to you personally. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Homework for Class Eight: Helpers in Disguise

1) How was Naktso Lotsawa selected as the person who would go to India to make a final attempt to bring Lord Atisha to Tibet? What qualifications did he have for this task, and what made him decide to go? How does his example apply to our own lives?

2) What strange event happened as Naktso Lotsawa and his travelling party approached the fortress of the capital of Nepal? And what lesson does it contain for our own life?

3) Naktso Lotsawa and friends reach the gates of Vikramalashila at night, after they have been closed and locked against intruders, not to be opened until morning. A Tibetan sticks his head out of a small window in the wall and tells them to come back in the morning but to leave their gold (about \$4 million dollars of gold apparently, by today's standards) in a little nook in the wall, and not to worry about it. Unquestioning they follow his advice. What is the lesson here for us?

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Homework, Class Eight

4) Gya Tsundru Sengge, a Tibetan monk who has been staying near Lord Atisha for some time trying to induce him to come to India, greets Naktso Lotsawa and his companions and gives them advice on how to approach the head of the monastery, whose name is Master Ratnakara, in order to make their request about inviting the Lord. What can we learn about our relationship with our own Teacher from this exchange?

5) Holy beings like the Angel of Compassion (Avalokiteshvara), and the Lady of Liberation (Tara), appear to Lord Atisha and encourage him to come to Tibet to help spread the Dharma there. They warn him though that there will be a negative consequence to the mission. Describe this consequence, and explain how it also applies to ourselves in modern times.

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, a contemplation in which we try to identify two people with whom we interacted either today or yesterday, and who may have been Dromtun Je or some other holy being, trying to direct us in some surprising way further along our path. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:

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Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Homework Master for Class Nine:
Stop Making Decisions

1) What issue about the relationship between the open and secret teachings did Lord Atisha face when he reached Tibet? How is this issue resolved?

2) It is said that one of the main reasons that Lord Atisha wrote his historic first lam-rim text, the *Light on the Path to Enlightenment*, is that he was pleased by the questions that he was asked by the Tibetan king upon their first meeting—questions that the text was designed to address. What are five of these questions which Pabongka Rinpoche mentions in his text, and how are they briefly answered?

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Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Nine

3) Pabongka Rinpoche mentions, in passing, that his own precious Teacher (whose name was Dakpo Jampel Hlundrup) said that the Tibetan king Jangchub U had displeased Lord Atisha about one thing during their first meeting. What did the King do that was wrong, and what implications does it have for our own lives?

4) Pabongka Rinpoche next explains how Lord Atisha and his principal Tibetan disciple, Dromtun Je, first met each other. What do we learn for our own personal practice from Dromtun Je's attitude about the timing of this meeting and the gift that he made on that first day? And what was missing from the offering that Lord Atisha received that same day?

5) How, according to Pabongka Rinpoche, was a newly written commentary evaluated in ancient India? What implications are there here for our own efforts to spread the Dharma?

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Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Nine

6) What event decided the question of whether Lord Atisha would remain in Tibet to instruct these difficult yak-herders? How does this apply to the idea that we should stop making decisions?

7) Why, surprisingly, did the great sages of India find Lord Atisha's lam-rim so refreshing? What are the implications for ourselves, as the people who will be passing these teachings on to others?

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, a contemplation on one or two difficult decisions that face you right now, and what kind of seed you might need to plant in order for the decision to just be made for you automatically, and perfectly. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations:



A Gift of Liberation
Course Two—Why Are We Alive?
Homework Master for Class Ten: Tears in a Meadow

- 1) What event happened between Lord Atisha and Dromtun Je which reveals the value which Lord Atisha himself put upon his brief lam-rim text? What lesson is there here for us?

- 2) What does Pabongka Rinpoche find particularly amazing about how Je Tsongkapa himself describes the passage of the lam-rim teachings through the lineage? What lesson is there here for us?

- 3) What did Manjushri, the Angel of Wisdom, find so humorous about Je Tsongkapa's completing a major section of one of the greatest books ever written in the Tibetan language? What does Pabongka Rinpoche encourage us to do at this point in our own teaching of the lam-rim, and how could this be facilitated in our times?

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Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Ten

4) After discussing Je Tsongkapa's role in the transmission of the lam-rim teachings in Tibet, Pabongka Rinpoche turns to how various lineages began to form from this point on. He devotes some time to the lineage of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama's *Word of Gentle Voice*, describing two distinct flows of transmission—one called the "Southern Lineage," and another known as the "Central Lineage." What are three differences between the two that he mentions at this point, and why is it important that they are included in our text?

5) Pabongka Rinpoche includes in his description of the Tibetan lineages of the lam-rim a number of anecdotes about the great teachers of these lineages, so we can gain some appreciation of what kind of people they were. What are two misconceptions that might come up about two of these sages—one with some firewood, and the other with a great boulder?

6) What story of the Southern Lineage do we hear taking place in a meadow, and how might it relate to us?

7) Why did we almost lose the oral transmission of the great lam-rim teaching known as *The Quick Path*, written by His Holiness the Second Panchen Lama, Lobsang Yeshe (1663-1737), almost as a commentary upon the famed *Path of Bliss* from His Holiness the First Panchen Lama?

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Course Two: Why Are We Alive?
Master, Class Ten

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, a meditation of gratitude for the kindness and hardships of those Lamas of the lam-rim lineage whose stories you recall—along with a few moments of determination to become one of these Lamas of the Lineage yourself. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations: