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INSTITUTE

9

THE ETHICAL LIFE  
Level 1 of Buddhist Discipline (*Vinaya*)

DHARMA ESSENTIALS





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## Class One Outline

- I. Introduction to the Dharma Essentials Series and to this Course
- II. Sanskrit and Tibetan Words for and Definitions of “Ethical Discipline”
- III. Importance of Ethical Discipline in Buddhism
  - A. Ethical discipline as a substitute for Lord Buddha
  - B. The role of ethical discipline in the three extraordinary trainings
- IV. Review of the Literature on Buddhist Discipline
  - A. Three major divisions of the commentary
  - B. Four major parts of the section on how to keep your vows from being damaged
- V. The Motivation With Which One Should Study Buddhist Ethics
- VI. Ethical Discipline and Karma
  - A. Ethics and the “wheel of life”
- VII. Meditation Assignment

Fifteen minutes a day on why leading an ethical life is crucial for your own happiness

## Class Two Outline

### I. Introduction to the Vows of Individual Freedom

- A. Meaning of the name “individual freedom”
- B. The six categories used to explain these vows
- C. The general description of these vows

### II. Grouping of the Individual Freedom Vows

- A. Vows relating to those living the family life
  - 1. The one day vows and the eight commitments
  - 2. The five lifetime layman’s or laywoman’s vows
- B. Vows relating to those who have left the family life
  - 1. The thirteen basic novice monk and nun vows
  - 2. Intermediate nun’s vows
  - 3. The six groups of full monk’s vows
  - 4. The six groups of full nun’s vows

### III. Who Can Take the Vows

- A. Seven characteristics of those ineligible to take vows

### IV. How the Vows are Lost

- A. Five general causes of losing these vows

### V. Benefits of Keeping the Vows

### VI. Meditation Assignment

Fifteen minutes a day on the five lifetime layman’s or laywoman’s vows and how you would keep these five ethical guidelines better in your own daily life

## Class Three Outline

### I. Avoiding the Ten Non-Virtues

- A. Killing
- B. Stealing
- C. Sexual Misconduct
- D. Lying
- E. Divisive speech
- F. Harsh words
- G. Idle talk
- H. Craving
- I. Ill will
- J. Wrong views

### II. The Types of Karmic Results

- A. Three types of “ripened results”
- B. The non-virtues and their specific karmic results
  - 1. “Consistent” consequences
  - 2. “Environmental” consequences

### III. Meditation Assignment

Fifteen minutes a day on your own worst non-virtues and their karmic consequences

## Class Four Outline

- I. The “Lam Rim” or “Steps of the Path”
  - A. *The Song of My Spiritual Life* by Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419)
  - B. The four special qualities of the “*Steps of the Path*”
    1. Free of inconsistency
    2. Personal advices from the Buddhas
    3. Everything directed toward Enlightenment
    4. Protection from the “Great Mistake”
  - C. Other benefits of learning the “Steps of the Path”
- II. The First Step: Taking Yourself to a Spiritual Guide
  - A. The Ten Qualities of a Qualified Lama
    1. Controlled
    2. Peaceful
    3. Completely peaceful
    4. With exceeding qualities
    5. Having effort
    6. Rich in scripture
    7. With a deep realization of suchness
    8. A master teacher
    9. The image of love
    10. Overcome all distaste
- III. Leisure and Fortune
- IV. Description of the Steps Shared With Those of Lesser Scope
  - A. Going for refuge
  - B. Purifying karma with the “four forces”
    1. “Basic” force
    2. “Destruction” force
    3. “Restraint” force
    4. “Antidote” force
- V. Description of the Steps Shared With Those of Medium Scope
  - A. The Four Arya Truths

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### VI. Description of the Steps of the Path for Those of the Greater Scope

- A. The Wish for Enlightenment
- B. The Six Perfections
  1. Giving
  2. Ethics
  3. Patience
  4. Joyful Effort
  5. Meditative Concentration
  6. Wisdom

### VII. Meditation Assignment

Fifteen minutes on the importance of finding and serving a spiritual teacher and the qualities the teacher should have.

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Reading One



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Dharma Essentials Course IX: The Ethical Life

Reading One:

The reading for this class consists of the entire text of Je Tsongkapa's *Epistle to Ngawang Drakpa on the Occasion of the Ordination of the First Monks of Gyalrong*. Master Ngawang Drakpa, also known as Tsako Wonpo ("the friar of the lineage of the Kings of Tsako"), was one of Je Tsongkapa's closest disciples. After he had trained him in the Dharma, Je Tsongkapa sent Ngawang Drakpa to a distant region in east Tibet, entrusted with the mission of establishing a number of monasteries and training Buddhist monks....

I bow down to my Lama, Gentle Voice.

I bow down to the matchless Teacher,  
Unknown to us our most loving friend,  
An ultimate and a peerless companion,  
The one brother we the needy possess.

I have seen that the only sustenance  
For living kind is his teachings alone;  
And so in love I impart these words  
To the one who is my disciple.

The high Dharma of the Victorious Ones  
Is a goldmine of happiness for all beings;  
And you, my son, are its fearless keeper—  
I pray you may reign for a thousand years.

Wise one the news is that you have brought  
The sunlight of the Able One's word  
To that dark far land, and filled it with princes  
Of Buddha kings practicing hard and pure.

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A letter informing me of these tidings,  
Lovely thoughts in lovely stars of words,  
Has due to your kindness reached me here,  
Borne by several freed from the family life.

When the note touched my hand  
The wind of your immaculate deeds  
Swept up the cotton wisp of my mind  
And carried my thoughts to you there.

The entire teachings of the Victors reside  
    in the three collections of scripture;  
Thus the essence of what they have taught  
    can be found within the three trainings.  
The very first one of all these three  
    is training in an ethical life,  
And its home the Buddhas have spoken to be  
    the teachings on discipline.

This too is why so much of the Dharma,  
    so high and spoken so pure,  
Has by the Buddhas been devoted  
    to the way of discipline.  
It explains as well why all those masters  
    who understand the order  
Of subjects to learn all take delight  
    in the teachings on discipline.

The training on perfect concentration,  
    quietude, must come  
Before one can ever the develop the one  
    on wisdom, the ultimate vision.  
Only a trace of this truth can be heard  
    anymore, and not a peep  
On the fact that good concentration can't come  
    without first training in ethics.

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Some people find only the courage to pledge  
    themselves in word to this training,  
Then later discard their commitments like trash;  
    they are lowest in a world of low.  
The way of the holy is different; they make  
    every conceivable effort  
In keeping whatever ethical rules  
    they may have committed to.

Once you have realized this fact  
    you must rely on watchfulness  
And awareness; constantly checking all three  
    of the gateways for any wrong deeds,  
Depending as well on a sense of care  
    and propriety to control  
With all your strength the wild horse  
    of the senses, seeking to keep

This steed from taking you to a path  
    that leads you all astray.  
With this state of mind you'll be able to hold  
    your concentration perfectly  
Fixed on any virtuous object  
    at your heart's content.  
Thus is the ethical life commended  
    for perfect concentration.

This state of mind is totally free  
    of the dirt of broken morality,  
And is never disturbed or distracted from  
    the object of goodness you choose;  
Therefore suchness, the lack of a self,  
    is perfectly clear to it,  
Just like the moon's reflection on water  
    undisturbed and crystal clear.

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A perfect understanding of all of the  
essential points like these  
Within the path of the three trainings  
depends precisely upon  
An understanding of all the three  
collections of Buddhist scripture;  
Thus you should take yourself to a master  
and train in the three collections.

The greatest teachers of all time  
have said, no single time,  
That the whole point of the trainings is reaching  
actual attainments.  
Take then whatever amount of the teachings  
you understand so far,  
And without procrastination, with speed,  
put them to work in your life.

...

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Reading Two:

The following selection consists of the first part of *Daymaker (Nyin-byed)*, composed by Master Ngulchu Dharma Bhadra (1772-1851) as a commentary to the *Essence of the Ocean of Discipline (Dul-ba rgya-mtso'i snying-po)*, a summary of the *vinaya* teachings by Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419).

Herein contained is  
*Daymaker:*  
*The Illumination of Lobsang's True Intent*  
a commentary upon the  
*Essence of the Ocean of Discipline...*

THE BASIC NATURE OF THE VOWS

This category has two parts: an identification of the basic nature of the vows of individual freedom, and the positions of different Buddhist schools as to whether their basic nature is physical or mental.

The identification of the basic nature of the vows is covered in the following lines of the root text:

**It is a turning away from harming others,  
And its basis, caused by an attitude  
Of renunciation...**

Here Je Tsongkapa is saying that one's commitment to these vows should be *caused by*—that is, motivated by—*an attitude* where one feels a deep disgust for every single inch of the cycle of suffering life, and has thus decided to *renounce* it. You should not take the vows simply because you are imitating someone else, or just following the crowd.

The basic nature of the vows then is as follows. In the presence of your Lama, you agree and pledge yourself to *turn away from harming others*; you agree to refrain from the seven physical and verbal deeds which are wrong by nature, *and* to avoid their *basis* as well. Here the word "basis" refers either to the three mental bad deeds that act as a foundation for the seven, or else to those bad deeds which were prohibited by Lord Buddha.

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The positions of different Buddhist schools as to whether their basic nature are physical or mental is expressed in these lines:

**...It is physical and verbal karma  
Which they assert is physical matter.  
The others say it is the intention to give up  
And its seed as it continues in your mind.  
Thus our schools' positions are two:  
What the higher and lower assert.**

*It*, meaning the basic nature of the individual freedom vows, *is physical and verbal karma*. According to the Abhidharma School this karma is a kind of invisible and ineffable *physical matter*. The Consequence section of the Middle Way School also *assert* that it *is physical matter*, but they say that it is physical matter belonging to the gateway of phenomena. *The others*—meaning the Sutrists, the Mind-Only School, and the Independent Section of the Middle-Way School—*say* that *it is the continued intention to give up* [bad deeds], *along with the seed* of this intention. *Thus* this verse explains that even in *our own Buddhist schools*, *two dissimilar positions* are *asserted* on this point in the tenets of *the higher and lower schools*....

#### THE DIVISIONS OF THE VOWS

My explanation of the divisions of the individual freedom vows will have two sections: the actual division of individual freedom vows into categories, and a grouping of the vows.

The actual divisions of the individual freedom vows are shown in these lines:

**Staying close, close to virtue.  
Way to virtue, versed in virtue,  
And begging for virtue. These are  
The eight kinds of individual freedom.**

The one-day vows are called "staying close" because they help you *stay close* to nirvana in the sense of taking you there. The lifetime vows for laymen and laywomen are called "close to virtue" because they help you be *close to virtue*, which here refers to nirvana. The vows of male novices and female novices are called "way to virtue" because those who possess these vows have entered the *way*, that is the path, which leads *to virtue*, again referring to nirvana. The vows

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of an intermediate nun are called "versed in virtue" because these women are *versing* themselves *in* the twelve rules, in order to be able to keep the vows of a fully ordained nun. Fully ordained monks and fully ordained nuns are called "begging for virtue" because they are *begging*, that is seeking, that state of *virtue*: nirvana. In this verse Je Tsongkapa is thus listing *the eight kinds of individual freedom vows....*

The grouping of the vows is given here:

**The first three vows are for laypeople,  
The last five vows for the ordained.**

Moreover, the eight classes of individual freedom vows mentioned above can be grouped according to who can take them. Here there are two broad groups: the vows which relate to laypeople, and the vows which relate to ordained people. The kinds of *vows* which relate to *laypeople are the first three*: one-day vows, the layman's lifetime vows, and laywoman's lifetime vows. The kind of *vows* which relate to those who are *ordained are the last five*: the vows of male novices, female novices, intermediate nuns, fully ordained nuns, and fully ordained monks.

#### INDIVIDUAL DESCRIPTIONS OF THE VOWS

The individual descriptions of the eight types of individual-freedom vows will subsume six sections: an identification of the one-day vows; the layperson's lifetime vows; the novice vows; the vows of an intermediate nun; the vows of a fully ordained nun; and the vows of a fully ordained monk.

#### *One-Day Vows*

The first section, the explanation of the one-day vows, has two points: an identification of what the one-day vow is, and an outline of the eight components which you agree to give up.

These lines of the root text identify the vow:

**The one-day vow is to give up eight:  
The root four and the secondary four.**

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*The one-day vow is to agree to give up, for the length of a single twenty-four hour period, the eight components to be abandoned: sexual activity and the rest of the root four components, as well as the use of high or valuable seats, along with the rest of the secondary four components. This vow can be taken from someone who has already taken the one-day vow, and who holds either the lifetime vow of a layperson, or any higher freedom vow.*

The eight components to give up are enumerated in these lines:

**The root four are sexual activity,  
Stealing, killing, and speaking lies.  
The secondary four are high valuable seats,  
Drinking alcohol, dancing and so on,  
Ornamentation and such, and food after noon.**

*The root four are sexual activity, stealing something of value, killing a human or a human fetus, and speaking lies about your spiritual realizations. The secondary four are (1) making use of a seat or bed which is valuable in that it incorporates jewels or some other precious substance, or else which is higher than a cubit; (2) drinking alcohol or any brewed or concocted substance which causes an intoxicated state; (3) dancing and "so on," which refers to singing and playing music, or else ornamenting yourself and "such"—that is, wearing jewelry or makeup; and finally (4) eating food after noon.*

*Lifetime Vows of a Layperson*

The explanation of the lifetime vows of a layperson contains two points: the actual identification of these vows, and an explanation of the different categories of the vow.

Here first is the identification of the vows:

**The lifetime layperson's vow is to give up  
The five of killing, stealing, and lying,  
Adultery, and drinking intoxicants.**

The procedure for taking *the lifetime vows of a layperson* is as follows. In the presence of a preceptor who holds at least these same vows, you begin with formally taking refuge. You next pledge that, for the length of your entire life, you will *give up* breaking the *five* basic rules, and avoid as well those actions

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which are inconsistent with the advices on going for refuge. The five rules here are to give up *killing* a human or human fetus; *stealing* anything of significant value (that is, anything worth more than a quarter of a *karshapana* [somewhere between an American quarter and a dollar]); *lying* about your spiritual attainments; committing *adultery* by having sexual relations with someone else's spouse; and *drinking* alcohol, or any substance which makes you *intoxicated*....

*Novice Vows*

The third section on the vows of a novice will have two points: an identification of the novice vows, and a description of the novice's rules.

The identification of the novice vow is expressed in these lines:

**The novice vow is giving up ten:  
The root four and the secondary six.**

*The novice vow is agreeing to give up, for as long as you live, ten different things to be abandoned: the root four of killing and the rest, and the secondary six of dancing and so on. The vow must be taken with a motivation of renunciation, in the presence of a preceptor, a ceremonial assistant, and a quorum of ordained people.*

The description of the novice vows is given in the following verse:

**The secondary come to six, by dividing into two  
Dancing and so on, and ornamentation and such,  
and then adding handling money to make three.  
To arrive at the thirteen things to give up  
On these then add the three failures:  
Not making supplications to your preceptor,  
Giving up the appearance of a layperson,  
And taking on the appearance of the ordained.**

*The secondary vows come to six, in the following way. We first divide into two the vow of giving up dancing and so on, and ornamentation and such. Then we add the rule about not handling money, and this makes three. If on top of these we add the three that concern drinking alcohol, eating food after noon, and using high valuable seats, the total is six.*

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By adding these to the root four that prohibit killing, stealing, sexual activity, and lying, we come to ten main things which must be given up. (Je Tsongkapa does not explicitly mention certain of the secondary six, nor the root four, at this point in his text because he already covered them in the section on the one-day vow.)

Over and above *these* ten we *add the three failures of not making supplications to your preceptor, not giving up the appearance of a layperson, and not taking on the appearance of the ordained; we thus arrive at a total of thirteen.* The vow of a novice is *to give up* these thirteen, which are known as "transgressions of the vow taken directly from the preceptor."...

*The Vows of an Intermediate Nun*

The identification of the vows of an intermediate nun vow has two points: an identification of the intermediate nun's vows, and an description of the rules for intermediate nuns.

The identification of these vows is given in the following lines of the root text:

**The intermediate nun's vows consist  
Of giving up the basic six parts  
As well as the ancillary six,  
Subsequent to receiving the novice vow....**

*Vows of a Full Nun*

The fifth section concerns the identification of the vows of a full nun. The root text on this point reads as follows:

**The vows of a full nun consist of giving up  
Three hundred and sixty-four different things:  
The eight defeats and twenty remainders,  
Thirty-three downfalls of release,  
A hundred and eighty simple downfalls,  
Eleven deeds for individual confession,  
And a hundred and twelve offenses....**

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*Vows of a Full Monk*

The sixth section is an identification of the vows of a full monk, and is presented in the following lines:

**The vows of a full monk consist of giving up  
Two hundred and fifty-three different things:  
The sum of four defeats and thirteen remainders,  
Thirty downfalls of release,  
Ninety different simple downfalls,  
Four deeds for individual confession,  
And a hundred and twelve offenses....**

WHO CAN TAKE THE VOWS

The fourth category is an explanation of the kinds of people who can take the individual freedom vows.

The root text at this point says:

**The eight types of individual freedom  
Can be taken by males or females  
On three continents of Dzambu and the rest,  
But not on Terrible Sound. Not by the impotent,  
Neuters, hermaphrodites, or the like.**

*Those eight types of individual freedom vows which I explained above can be taken by people, male or female, who live on the three continents of Dzambu, Greatbody and Cattleusers, but not by those who live on the northern continent of Terrible Sound, or on one of the two subcontinents related to this continent. The vows cannot be taken by the following types of beings:*

those who are *impotent* in the sense of being unable to have sexual relations;

*neuters*, which includes five kinds of "male" neuters (neuters from birth, half-month neuters, contact neuters, jealousy neuters, and neuters by castration) and five kinds of "female" neuters (hermaphroditic neuters, neuters by connection, neuters who are always menstruating, neuters who never menstruate, and infertile neuters);

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as well as *hermaphrodites*, who possess both male and female sexual organs.

Neither can vows be taken by persons who have committed an immediate misdeed, by those who are impostors attempting to learn about the tradition for their own reasons, by persons who hold wrong views, *or anyone of the like*.

HOW THE VOWS ARE LOST...

**The causes for losing your vows are two.  
Those shared are returning, dying and moving,  
Both organs appearing, changing three times,  
And cutting the very root of virtue.**

The *two causes for losing your vows* are the shared causes for losing any of the eight types of individual freedom vows, and the unique causes for losing certain ones of them. The *shared causes* for losing any of the vows are the following:

*returning* your vows by pronouncing the words of the ritual for returning them, where you say "I give back my vows..." and so on in the presence of a fully-ordained monk or the like;

*dying and moving* on to your next birth;

having *both* male and female sexual *organs appear* on you simultaneously;

*changing sexes three times*;

*or cutting the very root of your virtue* by holding wrong views.

The unique causes for losing certain ones of the vows are explained in these lines:

**Finding out that you're not twenty,  
Agreeing to have, and the end of a day;  
These the respective unique for full monks  
And nuns, intermediate nuns, and one-day.**

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*The unique causes for losing the vows of a fully-ordained monk, an intermediate nun, and a one-day vow are, respectively, the following three:*

not being twenty years old when you took full monk's vows, but thinking you were as you did, and then later *finding out that* you weren't twenty, while *you're still not twenty* (here the time spent in the womb is included in the twenty);

*agreeing to have sex with a man;*

and *the ending of a day* (that is, one 24-hour period), which is the amount of time that you committed to keep the vow....

BENEFITS OF KEEPING YOUR VOWS...

**It is stated that, from keeping these vows,  
One attains the temporal result of birth  
As a pleasure being or human; and as  
An ultimate result three enlightenments.**

Many times, throughout all of the open and secret teachings of the Buddha and their commentaries, *it is stated that* if one *keeps properly the eight types of individual freedom vows* which I have just described, then *he or she attains the temporal result of a higher birth as a pleasure being or human, as well as the ultimate result of "definite good"—which refers to one of the three kinds of enlightenment: the enlightenment of the listener, the enlightenment of the Self-Made Buddhas, and the unsurpassable state of total Enlightenment.*

In particular, the text known as *Entering the Middle Way* states:

There's no other cause than the ethical life  
for the definite good,  
And higher rebirths, of ordinary beings,  
and those born from speech,  
And those individuals who are committed  
to self-made Buddhahood,  
And finally those who are the princes  
of the victorious Buddhas.

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The encouragement on keeping the vows that have these benefits is expressed in the root text with the lines that follow next:

**Therefore those of you willing to make effort  
Should in respect and always strive to keep them.**

The benefits thus have been described as limitless; *therefore*, for this reason, *those of you who are willing to make an effort* (which means, those of you who wish to give some meaning to the spiritual leisures and fortunes you've found) *should* put forth two kinds of effort where you *always strive, and strive with feelings of respect, to keep these vows*: cherish them as you do your own life, and then give it all your strength....

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### Reading Three:

The following selection is taken from the *Great Book on the Steps of the Path (Lam-rim chen-mo)*, written by Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419)....

The "consistent" consequences are as follows....

The *Chapter on the True* and the *Sutra on the Ten Levels* state that there are two such consequences for each of the ones given here; even if you do manage to take birth as a human,

- 1) Your life is short, and you get sick easily.
- 2) You don't have enough to live on, and what you do have is all just common property with others.
- 3) The people who work around you are "inconsistent," which here means unreliable, and you find yourself having a lot of competition for your partner.
- 4) No one believes what you say, even when you are speaking the truth, and others are always deceiving you.
- 5) The people around you are always fighting against one another, and have an undesirable character.
- 6) You hear many unpleasant things, and when others talk to you it always seems to you as if they want to start a fight.
- 7) No one respects what you say—no one thinks that what you say has any particular value, and you are afflicted with a lack of confidence.
- 8) Your personality is dominated by desire, and you are never satisfied with what you have.
- 9) You are always finding yourself without help, or never find the help you need; and you are always hurting others, or always being hurt by others.
- 10) You become a person who keeps harmful views, or a deceitful person....

Next is what we call the "environmental" or "dominant" consequence. Here for example the consequence of killing expresses itself in the outer world around you. Food, drink, medicine, the crops in the fields, and other such things have very little power; they are always inferior; they have little nutrition or potency; they are hard to digest, and they cause disease in you. Because of this the majority of the living beings around you die before reaching the end of a full life.

Because you have stolen, then the crops are few and far between; the crops have no power to remove hunger; they spoil; they never come up; dry spells stay on

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too long; it rains too much; the crops dry up, or die off.

Because you have done wrong sex, you live in a place where there is urine and feces all around, and mud and dirt and filth, and everything stinks, and everywhere seems unpleasant and distasteful.

Because you have lied, you live in a world where, when you undertake farming or some work in cooperation with other people, in the end the work fails to prosper, and the people can't work well together, and for the most part everyone is cheating one another, and is afraid, and where there are many things to be afraid of.

Because you have split people up with your talk, the very ground in the place you live is all uneven, covered with crags and gullies, full of highs and lows, so that you can travel only with difficulty, and where you are always afraid, and there are many things to be afraid of.

Because you have spoken harsh words, the ground where you live is covered with obstacles like the trunks of fallen trees, and thorns, and stones, and clods of dirt, and lots of sharp broken pieces of glass; it's rough, and dreary; no streams, or lakes, or springs of water; the whole earth is parched, poisoned with salt and borax, burning hot, useless, threatening; a place where there are many things to fear.

Because you have talked meaninglessly, fruits refuse to grow on the trees, or they start to grow at the wrong times, never at the right times, and seem ripe when they're still not ripe, or their roots are frail, or they can't stay long; there are no places to take your leisure, no parks, no glades, no pools of cool water, and many things around to make you afraid.

Because you have coveted what others have, then each and every good thing you ever manage to find starts to get worse, and less and less, never more, each one of them, with the passing of each of the four season, and in every month, and even day by day.

Because you have wished bad things on others, you live in a world of chaos, where diseases spread, and evil is everywhere, and plague, and conflict, and fear from the armies of other nations; where there are many lions or leopards or other dangerous animals; where there are everywhere venomous snakes or scorpions or poison biting worms; surrounded by harmful spirits, and thieves or muggers, and the like.

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Because you have held wrong views, then you live in a world where the single highest source of happiness is steadily disappearing from the earth; a world where people think that things that are unclean and things that are suffering are actually nice, and happy; a world where there is no place to go, no one to help, nothing to protect you....

The following reading consists of the first part of the *Song of My Spiritual Life* (*Nyam mgur*) of Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419). This text is also known as *The Short Book on the Steps of the Path* (*Lam rim bsdus don*). Accompanying the verses of Je Tsongkapa's root text is a commentary called *Illumination of the Essence* (*Snying po mdor bsdus gsal ba*), composed by Choney Lama Drakpa Shedrup (1675-1748).

JE TSONGKAPA  
SONG OF MY SPIRITUAL LIFE  
*The Short Book on the Steps of the Path*

Herein is contained the  
*Brief Illumination of the Essence*,  
a word-by-word commentary on the  
*Short Book on the Steps of the Path*....

THE PRELIMINARIES

The preliminary division of my text has two parts of its own: the offering of praise, and an identification of that which is to be explained.

OFFERING OF PRAISE

**I bow down to Guru Manjushri.**

The offering of praise is in two sections. First is the line "I bow down to Guru Manjushri," which appears in some editions of the text. Its meaning is easy to understand.

*Prostration to the Lord of the Able Ones*

The second section of the offering of praise is contained in five points. The first is

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an obeisance to the Lord of the Able Ones which is expressed in the first four lines of the root text which begins "To His exalted body born from perfect complete goodness and millions of virtues."

(1)

**To His Exalted body  
born from perfect complete goodness  
and millions of virtues,**

**To His exalted speech  
which fulfills the hopes  
of infinite living beings,**

**To His exalted mind  
which sees each and every  
knowable thing just as it is,**

**To the Prince of the Shakyas,  
with my head  
I bow down.**

The general good qualities of the Buddha are the three of His knowledge, love, and power; and also those things which He has realized and those which He has abandoned. However, if we were to restrict ourselves to the good qualities of *His exalted body* alone, it is His major and minor marks which set Him apart. There are certain causes which produce these great qualities—they are *born from millions of instances of goodness and virtue*. They are not produced by merely some isolated occasions of this goodness and virtue, but rather by their *perfect completion*, which is subsumed under the accumulations of merit and wisdom.

Here the word "million" does not necessarily refer specifically to the exact number one million, but is used rather to express a great quantity. If you are interested in the exact kinds of causes which go into each major and minor mark, that is clarified in *The String of Precious Jewels*. Such works as the *Mother Sutras*, as well as the *Ornament of Realizations*, go through their each and every cause individually.

The good quality of *His exalted speech* could be explained with regards to its nature, but let us here consider it from the point of view of its result. The good quality or function of the speech of the One Thus Gone is acting to *fulfill* both the

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temporal and ultimate *hopes of living beings* who are *infinite* in number. By what means does it fulfill their hopes? It benefits them by teaching them those teachings which resolve the doubts at every juncture in their life, and by leading them toward the higher realms and definite good.

As for the nature of the particular good qualities of *His exalted mind*, it sees directly *each and every knowable thing just as it is*—all of them, the way they are, as many as they may be.

There is a way in which we may bow down to *the Prince of the Shakya* clan, to Shakyamuni, who possesses these exalted qualities of body, speech, and mind. To Him, the able one of the Shakyas, we may bow down with the very highest of our limbs, making prostrations with our head.

*Prostration to Loving One and Gentle Voice*

The second point is contained within these lines of the root text:

(2)

**I bow down  
to the Undefeatable,  
and to Gentle Voice,**

**Those supreme sons  
of our Teacher,  
who is without rival.**

**Having taken on  
the load of all the  
Victorious One's activity,**

**They act by  
emanating themselves  
In countless paradises.**

*Having taken on*—that is, accepted—*the load of all the activity* of the *Victorious One's* exalted body, speech and mind, *the Undefeatable Loving One and Gentle Voice* are putting on a show. Not only on this planet but *in countless Buddha paradises* they are *acting* out their parts *by emanating themselves* as bodhisattvas and other types of beings. Je Tsongkapa bows down to those two

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*dharma sons of our unrivaled Teacher*, the two who are *supreme* among all bodhisattvas.

The way in which they take on the load of His activity is as follows. Both Loving One and Gentle Voice cause the holy teachings of the Able One in general, and more specifically, the lineage of widespread activities and the lineage of profound view to remain and flourish in the world.

*Prostration to Nagarjuna and Asanga*

The third point of the offering of praise is expressed in the following verse:

(3)

**To those jewels  
of our Southern Continent  
who commented just as was meant**

**Upon the *Mother of the Victors*  
which is so very  
difficult to fathom.**

**To those who are  
known throughout  
all of the three realms**

**To Nagarjuna and Asanga  
at their feet  
I bow down.**

Here the prostration is made in general to the highest form of speech—that of the Victorious Buddhas—and more particularly *to* the savior *Nagarjuna* and the realized being *Asanga*. These two are here named to represent all of those *who commented just as it was meant* to be *upon* the true intent of those sutras which are *so very difficult to fathom*; that is, to grasp. Here we are referring to the *Mother of the Victors* in all its three forms—extensive, middle length, and brief. *These two masters, who are known throughout all the three realms*—below the earth, upon the earth, and above the earth— have become like the *jewels of our Southern Continent*. The *"I"* referred to here in the text, the one who is *bowing down at their feet*, is the glorious Lobsang Drakpa.

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*Prostration to Atisha*

These lines contain the fourth point of the offering of praise:

(4)

**I bow down to the Maker of Light,  
the one who holds  
the treasury of instructions**

**Which contain without mistake,  
the totality of  
all the important points—**

**Those of the path  
of profound view,  
and those of widespread activity—**

**Which came down to him  
so perfectly through the lineage  
of the two great innovators.**

Here Je Tsongkapa *bows down* to Atisha, the glorious *Maker of Light*. He is *the one who holds the treasury of instructions which contain in their entirety without mistake the totality of all the important points of the steps of the path of the teachings on profound view and widespread activity*. These instructions *came down to him perfectly through the lineage* which began with *the two great innovators*, Nagarjuna and Asanga. By relying on the Lama Serlingpa, the Great Lord Atisha heard those teachings which came down through the lineage of Loving One and Asanga, and by relying on Vidyakokila he heard in their entirety the teachings from the lineage of Gentle Voice and Nagarjuna. He then composed commentaries combining together these two great currents of teachings.

*Prostration to all Spiritual Guides*

The last point of the offering of praise is contained within this verse of the root text:

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(5)

**I bow down  
with deep respect  
to all Spiritual Guides.**

**Inspired by their love  
they act with skillful means  
in order to make clear**

**The supreme entry point  
for those fortunate ones  
who are travelling to freedom—**

**That eye which can see  
all the myriad forms  
of the Buddha's supreme speech.**

This very teaching on the steps of the path for people of the three capacities is like an *eye* with *which you can see all the myriad forms of the Buddha's supreme speech*, and not only certain parts of it. It is also *the supreme entry point* and path which allows *fortunate disciples* to *travel to freedom*. Here our Lord *bows down to all the Spiritual Guides* who *inspired* and driven *by their* exalted thoughts of *love* are *acting with skillful means in order to make* this teaching *clear* to their disciples. He bows down not only in his words, but *with deep* thoughts of *respect*.

Some people explain that the words "that eye which can see" refer to the Spiritual Guide, but Je Tsongkapa's true intention was that the "eye" refer to the teaching on the steps itself. This fact is made clear towards the ends of his *Great Book on the Steps of the Path*.

IDENTIFICATION OF WHAT IS GOING TO BE EXPLAINED...

*Special Features of the Teaching...*

The actual special features of the teachings are indicated here in the root text:

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(8)

**You'll realize that  
all the Buddha's teachings  
totally lack inconsistency,**

**And His highest of speech  
will strike you as  
personal advice.**

**You will easily  
find the true intent  
of the Victorious Buddhas,**

**And be protected from  
falling into the chasm  
of the great mistake.**

This teaching possesses four special features, or you could say four great qualities. The first is that if you rely on this teaching *you will* come to *realize that all of the Buddha's teachings are totally lacking any inconsistency*. Of all the teachings spoken by the Victorious Buddhas, however many there may be, some of them teach the principal paths and others teach that which branches off from them. Once you know this, you will come to understand that they are all either direct or indirect factors in reaching enlightenment.

You will not have the wrong view which considers the open and secret teachings of the Buddha—those highest of all words—and the classical commentaries which comment upon their true intent to be mere explanations. You will not think that you have to look somewhere other than in the content of these books for something to use for your personal practice. Rather you will come to see that the entire subject matter of the Buddha's supreme speech along with its classical commentaries is perfectly in keeping with the progressive structure through which you do your actual practice. You will come to understand how it is that every step from taking yourself to a Spiritual Guide all the way up to the practices of developing quietude and special vision can be put into your personal practice, either through analytical meditation or through fixation meditation.

If you understand these points, then all of the *high speech* of the Buddha *will strike you as personal advice*. This is the second of the great qualities. Even though all of the teachings of the Buddha are the ultimate form of personal

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instruction, us spiritual beginners who haven't studied enough are unable to understand the true intent of the great scriptures on our own, nor are we able to bring them into our personal practice. Therefore we need to rely on something like this teaching on the steps of the path to enlightenment, through which our Lamas give us their personal advice on the true meaning of these original works.

This makes it *easy* for us to grasp *the true intent of the Victorious Buddhas*, and that is another great quality of the teaching on the steps. Once you *find* this true intent, you will understand that every word the Buddha ever said contributes either directly or indirectly to our reaching enlightenment, and that there is not a single word He spoke which does not teach a method of achieving enlightenment.

In the Buddha's teachings there can appear to be some slight inconsistencies, which are required due to the needs of particular disciples, and there are also distinctions between the higher and lower teachings. But there is no difference between any of them from the point of view that they were all taught solely as methods for reaching enlightenment. If you become certain of this, you will never commit the bad deed of rejecting Buddhist teachings, and will thus *be protected from falling into the chasm of that great mistake*. This is the last of the four great qualities.

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Reading Four:

The following reading consists of the second major section of the *Song of My Spiritual Life (Nyam mgur)* of Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419). This text is also known as *The Short Book on the Steps of the Path (Lam-rim bsdus-don)*. Accompanying the verses of Je Tsongkapa's root text is a commentary called *Illumination of the Essence (Snying-po mdor-bsdus gsal-ba)*, composed by Choney Lama Drakpa Shedrup (1675-1748).

THE ACTUAL BODY OF THE TEXT

Those points concerning the offering of praise and so on are secondary parts of the text. Here I am going to make my explanation with reference to the actual meaning of the text. I shall do so in two parts: the way to practice the shared paths, and the way to practice the path which is not shared.

THE WAY TO PRACTICE THE SHARED PATHS

The discussion of the way to practice the shared paths is divided into two: the preliminary step followed by the main steps.

THE PRELIMINARY STEP

The preliminary step is covered in these lines of the root text:

(11)

**After having done this, see that  
the very foundation  
Of an excellent start for all the good  
in this and your future lives  
Is the holy Spiritual Guide  
who teaches you the path.**

**Make efforts to rely on Him properly  
in your thoughts and in your actions;  
Please Him with the offering of  
carrying out His every instruction.  
And never give it up, not even  
at the cost of your life.**

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**I, the master meditator,  
lived my life this way;**

**You, who seek for freedom,  
must try to do the same.**

First you must contemplate the points above, such as the great benefits that come from putting into practice all, or even just a part of, the steps of the path. *After having done this*, says Je Tsongkapa, you should begin the actual practices which are to follow. He uses these words to lead the reader into the actual steps of the path.

Having understood these benefits, you must then *see that the holy Spiritual Guide who teaches you the path is the very foundation* for getting you off to an excellent start for all the good in this and your future lives. Realize that all this depends on how you serve your Lama, and then with fierce *efforts rely* on Him *in your thoughts* by stopping that state of mind which thinks it sees faults in Him, and by developing feelings of faith towards Him as much as you can.

Rely *properly* on your Lama *in your actions* by paying Him respect with your body, praising Him with your words, and so forth. Undertake whatever you can to please your Lama in every possible way, and never undertake anything which would displease Him. Accomplish whatever He or She tells you to do.

Understanding this, you must *please* your Lama *with the offering of carrying out His every instruction*. You can *never give this up even at the cost of you life*, so what need is there to say anything about mere small incidents? ...

If you want to know the defining qualities of a Lama, the way in which you should rely on Him or Her, and other such details, you can learn them in the books on the steps of the path, and other such works.

#### THE MAIN STEPS

The section on the main steps has two points: an urging to take the essence of your leisure and fortune, and the way to take that essence.

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*An Urging to Take the Essence of This Life...*

*The Way to Take the Essence of This Life...*

The way to practice taking the essence of this life will be explained in three divisions: the path shared with people of lesser capacity, the path shared with people of medium capacity, and the actual path for people of greater capacity.

THE PATH SHARED WITH PEOPLE OF LESSER CAPACITY

The path shared with people of lesser capacity has two parts of its own: developing the state of mind in which you look ahead to your future lives, and how to make use of those methods which can bring you happiness in your future lives.

DEVELOPING THE STATE OF MIND WHICH LOOKS AHEAD TO FUTURE LIVES

Developing the state of mind which looks ahead to your future lives has two sections: the contemplation on your impermanence— the fact that you have to die, and the contemplation on the sufferings of the lower realms.

*The Contemplation on Your Impermanence...*

*The Contemplation on the Sufferings of the Lower Realms...*

METHODS FOR ACHIEVING HAPPINESS IN YOUR FUTURE LIVES

The explanation of the methods for achieving happiness in your future lives has three sections: the teachings on going for refuge, along with certain advices concerning this practice; a description of the need to act properly with regard to what you should and should not be doing relative to the two kinds of deeds; and an explanation of the foundation for achieving the state of all-knowing.

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*Going for Refuge, and the Advices for this Practice...*

(14b)

**Polluted by downfalls and the stench of bad deeds  
committed through all three doors,  
It's crucial to purify yourself, especially of  
the obstacles these deeds create.  
You must then with great reverence depend  
on the four forces, continually.**

**I, the master meditator,  
lived my life this way;  
You, who seek for freedom,  
must try to do the same.**

In general people like you and me are full of mental afflictions and the bad deeds which we have *committed through all the three doors* through which we express ourselves: our body, speech, and mind. More specifically, we are *polluted by the stench of* both those *bad deeds* which are wrong by their own nature, *and* the *downfalls* or cases where we have transgressed the rules established by the Buddha. *It is crucial that you purify yourself* of the two different kinds of obstacles: those created by your bad deeds, those of your bad thoughts.

This is *especially true of the obstacles that bad deeds create*. You must *depend upon all four* of the *forces* involving confession and restraint, *continually*, in order to achieve this purification. These four are the force of the basis, the force of destruction, the force of turning away, and the force of the antidote. *You should follow these four with great reverence....*

The following reading consists of the third major section of the *Song of My Spiritual Life (Nyam mgur)* of Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419). This text is also known as *The Short Book on the Steps of the Path (Lam-rim bsdus-don)*. Accompanying the verses of Je Tsongkapa's root text is a commentary called *Illumination of the Essence (Snying-po mdor-bsdus gsal-ba)*, composed by Choney Lama Drakpa Shedrup (1675-1748).

THE PATH SHARED WITH PEOPLE OF MEDIUM CAPACITY

The method for putting into practice the steps of the path shared with people of

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medium capacity has two parts: the reasons why it is necessary to contemplate what's wrong with the truth of suffering and the truth of the source of suffering; and then the actual contemplation....

THE ACTUAL CONTEMPLATION

The actual contemplation on the problems of the first two truths has two parts: the contemplation on the truth of suffering—the problems of the cycle of life, and the contemplation on the truth of the source of suffering—how it is that we are thrown into this cycle of life.

*The Contemplation on the Truth of Suffering*

These lines of the root text indicate the contemplation of the truth of suffering:

(15b)

**With a solid disgust for this existence  
that definitely wants to get out,**

Look at all of the suffering in this circle of life; look at birth, aging, sickness and death, at grief and crying out in pain, at our mental unhappiness, at the heat and the cold, all the fighting, and on and on. Then *with a fierce and solid disgust for this existence that definitely wants to get out* of the cycle of suffering you must try to understand the cause which creates this suffering, as it will be explained later in the text.

*The Contemplation on the Truth of the Source*

The contemplation on the truth of the source of suffering is expressed here in the root text:

(15c)

**Finding out about this suffering cycle  
should be treated with great concern.**

**I, the master meditator,  
put this into practice;  
You, who seek for freedom, must  
try to practice this way.**

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*Finding out about* what chains you to *this suffering cycle should be treated* as something extremely important and *with great concern*. You are chained by both your deeds and your bad thoughts. If we were to divide these out into all of their different forms, there would be a great many of them. To state it in a nutshell, the mental afflictions in the mindstream of a common person—that is, desire, anger, pride, ignorance, bad forms of doubt, jealousy, and so on—are all the truth of the source of suffering in the form of mental afflictions, and the deeds which are motivated by them—both virtuous and non-virtuous—are the truth of the source of suffering in the form of deeds....

The way to cut the very root of this cycle is with the wisdom which perceives the lack of a "self." You use this wisdom to invalidate the object in which ignorance believes, and by the time you familiarize yourself with this process fully you are able to eliminate this ignorance, and thus cut the root of the cycle of suffering. When ignorance is eliminated, all the other mental afflictions are by the way removed themselves.

If between the pair of the truth of suffering and the truth of the source of suffering you are able to eliminate the truth of the source, then you will also be able to remove the truth of the source of suffering; if you cut the root of the plant, for example, the plant itself dies....

#### THE WISH FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

The explanation of the wish for enlightenment, the basis of a bodhisattva's activities, includes two sections.

##### *Special Features or Benefits of the Wish for Enlightenment*

First I will explain the special features, or benefits of the wish for enlightenment, as expressed in the following lines of the root text:

(16a)

**The wish for enlightenment is the central beam  
which holds up the supreme way's path;  
It's also the foundation and the basis  
of a bodhisattva's mighty activity.**

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**It is like the elixir of an alchemist  
for both of the two great masses,  
And a treasury of merit containing the collections  
of a myriad number of virtues.**

*The wish for enlightenment as it is found in the greater way is like the central beam which holds up the path of the supreme way. It is the foundation and basis which allows the mighty bodhisattva activities of giving, and the rest of the six perfections, and other such activities to come into being, to remain, and likewise to increase.*

*Like an alchemical elixir that acts to transform a piece of ordinary iron into gold, this wish transforms both of the two great masses of merit and wisdom into total enlightenment. It is also a great treasury which contains many great collections of a myriad number of virtues.*

In his text, Je Tsongkapa not only indicates the reasons why we must develop the wish for enlightenment, but with the words "foundation and basis" he also shows us that this wish for enlightenment as it is found in the greater way is the very door for entering the path of the greater way.