Chapter 8 A Systematic Approach

Awakening refers to the ultimate qualities of the mind; the path to awakening eliminates the impediments and enhances the qualities leading to this state. Tibetans translated *bodhi*, the Sanskrit word for awakening, as *jangchup*. *Jang* means "to cleanse" and in this case refers to true cessation, the cleansing or elimination of afflictions, their seeds, and latencies. *Chup* refers to having cultivated all positive qualities. *Jang* highlights the buddhas' abandoning all faults, and *chup* denotes their qualities and realisations. Awakening is not granted by an external being but is attained through the process of cleansing and cultivating our minds. The potential to attain it is already within us: the nature of the mind is clarity and cognisance, so the capacity to perceive all phenomena is already there. We need to eliminate obstacles to doing this by realising the empty nature of all phenomena.[39]

Paths for Spiritual Development

To attain a buddha's qualities, we need to develop many diverse aspects of our body, speech and mind. Throughout the ages, Buddhist masters have used various paradigms that set out a progressive path to do this, and in this chapter, we will explore some of these. These step-by-step presentations outline a systematic path that allows each person to practice at his or her own level and progress in a comfortable and gradual way.

We'll begin with **Āryadeva's presentation of three stages of the path**:

> First prevent the demeritorious (faults, non-virtues);
> next prevent self;
> later prevent views of all kinds.
> Whoever knows of this is wise.

This verse may be understood in two ways. In the first way, "First prevent the demeritorious" indicates the necessity of abandoning the ten paths of non-virtue[40] and practicing the ten paths of virtue in order to prevent an unfortunate rebirth and gain a fortunate one. "Next prevent self" means to abandon grasping at the coarse self of persons—a self-sufficient substantially existent person. While abandoning this grasping does not bring arhatship or buddhahood, it does stop the coarse afflictions. "Later prevent views of all kinds" indicates realising the emptiness of true existence and employing this wisdom to eradicate all afflictions from the root.

The second way to approach this verse is to start with the final goal and work backward. To attain full awakening, all cognitive obscurations must be eradicated, as indicated by "Later prevent views of all kinds." To eliminate these, it is not sufficient to contemplate the *object clear light*—the ultimate nature, emptiness—based on subtle dependent arising. From the viewpoint of highest yoga tantra, we must

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[39] Newcomers to Buddhism occasionally ask me what it feels like to be awakened. I don't know, but I think it must be a sense of deep satisfaction and fulfilment due to knowing reality. To use an analogy: When we are ignorant about something, we feel uncomfortable and try to understand it. Once we have understood it and that obstacle has lifted, we feel tremendous relief. We feel pleased because we are fully confident that our understanding is correct. When we become fully awakened, we will directly realise all that exists, so imagine the deep satisfaction we will experience then. This gives us an idea of the mental joy a buddha experiences.

[40] The ten paths of non-virtue are actions that lead to negative outcomes, including three of the body (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct), four of speech (lying, divisive speech, harsh words, idle chatter), and three of mind (covetousness, harmful intent, wrong views). Conversely, the ten paths of virtue are the positive counterparts to these actions, such as preserving life, respecting others' property, practicing sexual responsibility, speaking truthfully and kindly, cultivating contentment, benevolence, and right views. Practicing these virtues leads to positive karma and spiritual progress.

make manifest the *subject clear light*—the subtlest mind that arises after the eighty conceptions and three appearances have dissolved[41]—and use it to realise suchness. Prior to this, we must realise emptiness and eradicate the afflictive obscurations, as indicated by "next prevent self." In order to do this, we need a continuous series of good rebirths in which we can practice the Dharma. The way to attain these is to "first prevent the demeritorious," the ten paths of non-virtue.

In **Lamp of the Path, Atiśa** sets out three stages of the path according to three levels of practitioners: great, medium, and initial. The path of the person of **great spiritual development** eliminates the cognitive obscurations so that he or she can become a buddha in order to benefit all sentient beings most effectively. This individual aims for the highest, longest-lasting bliss and peace for self and others—full awakening—and thus wants to extinguish duḥkha and its causes for both self and others. The cognitive obscurations that impede full awakening are the subtle latencies of ignorance and the appearance of inherent existence that they create. To remove these, a person must cultivate bodhicitta, practice the six perfections, and unite serenity and insight on subtle emptiness. This is the path of the practitioner of great capacity.

LEVEL OF PRACTITIONER	THEIR DIRECT AIM	WHAT THEY PRACTICE	WHAT THEY ELIMINATE
Initial	Fortunate rebirth	Pacifying coarse harmful thoughts, words, and deeds and practicing the ten virtues	Ten nonvirtues
Middle	Liberation (arhatship)	The three higher trainings	Afflictive obscurations: afflictions, their seeds, and polluted karma causing rebirth in saṃsāra
Advanced	Full awakening (buddhahood)	The six perfections, four ways of gathering disciples, Vajrayāna	Cognitive obscurations: latencies of afflictions and appearance of inherent existence

The path of the person of **medium spiritual development** eliminates the afflictive obscurations—the afflictions, their seeds and polluted karma that cause rebirth in cyclic existence. This person seeks liberation—the peace of nirvāṇa that is free from the cycle of uncontrolled rebirth. To do this, he or she practices the three higher trainings motivated by the determination to be free from cyclic existence and attain liberation.

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[41] The phrase "**eighty conceptions and three appearances** have dissolved" refers to advanced meditation states where dualistic thoughts and perceptions dissolve. The "eighty conceptions" are subtle thought patterns that arise from the basic afflictive emotions, while the "three appearances" relate to the final stages of dissolving the perception of reality into its most subtle form during the process of dying or deep meditation. This indicates a state of consciousness beyond ordinary perception, nearing the realisation of the ultimate nature of reality.

The path of the person of **initial spiritual development** eliminates coarse negativities, ie the ten paths of non-virtue—killing, stealing, unwise and unkind sexual conduct, lying, divisive speech, harsh words, idle talk, covetousness, malice, and wrong views. These ten cause unfortunate rebirths in the future as well as constant problems in this life. The beginning practitioner seeks the happiness in cyclic existence that comes from pacifying his gross mistaken thoughts, words, and deeds.

To express this path in a forward sequence, a practitioner must first and most urgently reduce his or her gross afflictions and harmful actions and practice the path of the ten constructive actions. Although his ultimate goal may be nirvāṇa or awakening, he must first deal with the most blatant obstacles to happiness by taking a defensive stand against them. He must especially prevent taking an unfortunate rebirth that would forestall his being able to practice the path for a long time.

The second level is the actual combat, going on the offensive to destroy the afflictions. A practitioner who is victorious over them attains nirvāṇa. The third step is to remove the latencies or stains left on the mindstream by the afflictions. Having eliminated these, a practitioner becomes a fully awakened buddha.

These three levels or capacities of practitioners form the basic outline for the presentation of the teachings in this book. Certain **meditations** are prescribed to cultivate the motivation specific to each level and other meditations to actualise the intended result of that motivation. The meditations on precious human life, death and gross impermanence, and the possibility of taking an unfortunate rebirth help us generate the aspiration to have a fortunate rebirth. We attain such a rebirth by taking refuge in the Three Jewels and observing the law of karma.

Meditations on the first two of the four truths inspire the aspiration for liberation within us. Generating true paths by practicing the three higher trainings (footnote 31 page 32) will bring about true cessations and liberation.

Meditation on the seven-point cause-and-effect instruction[42] and the meditation on equalising and exchanging self and others[43] are the methods to generate bodhicitta, the aspiration for full awakening to benefit all sentient beings. The method that leads to awakening is the practice of the six perfections, four ways of gathering disciples,[44] and Vajrayāna.

There are two types of initial-capacity practitioners, one superior and the other inferior. Superior initial-capacity practitioners seek higher rebirth as a human or a celestial being. Although they also seek the betterment of this life, their main focus is to create the causes for fortunate future lives. Lesser individuals think only of the

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[42] The **seven-point cause-and-effect instruction** is a method for developing bodhicitta. It involves:
1) recognising all beings as one's mother,
2) recalling their kindness,
3) wishing to repay their kindness,
4) developing affectionate love,
5) cultivating compassion,
6) developing the superior intention to take responsibility for others' welfare,
7) culminating in bodhicitta.

This emphasises the interconnectedness of all beings and altruistic intention to achieve enlightenment for their sake.

[43] The meditation on equalising and exchanging self and others is a profound practice aimed at reducing ego-centric attitudes and developing unconditional compassion. By first recognising the equality of oneself and others in wanting happiness and avoiding suffering, practitioners then work on mentally exchanging their own well-being for the happiness of others. This transformative method cultivates a deep sense of empathy, reduces selfishness and enhances the capacity to act for the benefit of all sentient beings.

[44] These are being generous and giving material aid, speaking pleasantly by teaching the Dharma to others according to their dispositions, encouraging them to practice, and living the teachings through example.

betterment of this life and do not prepare for future lives, although they may still create virtuous karma through being generous, living ethically, and so on.

LEVEL OF PRACTITIONER	MEDITATIONS THAT LEAD TO THE MOTIVATION OF THIS LEVEL	MOTIVATION	PRACTICES DONE TO ACTUALIZE THE RESULT OF THIS MOTIVATION
Initial	Precious human life, death and impermanence, unfortunate rebirth	To have a fortunate rebirth	Take refuge in the Three Jewels, observe the law of karma and its effects
Middle	The first two truths: true duḥkha and true origins	To attain true cessation, nirvāna	True paths: the higher trainings in ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom
Great	Equanimity, seven-point cause-and-effect instruction, equalizing and exchanging self and others	Bodhicitta	Six perfections, four ways of gathering disciples, Vajrayāna

Those of you who grew up in cultures where the belief in rebirth is not prevalent may initially come to Buddhism with the motivation simply to improve the quality of this life. At the moment, you are ordinary initial-level individuals who would like to experience less stress and anger, better relationships, improved health, and more peace of mind in this life, and you look to the Buddha's teachings as a way to that end. By using the Dharma to become a more balanced person, you will engage in fewer destructive actions and more constructive ones. As time goes on, you will learn about the existence of future lives, cyclic existence, liberation, awakening, and the paths leading to them. As you think about these topics and gain conviction in them, your perspective will expand, and you will want to create the causes to have a peaceful death and a good rebirth. You will become aware of the dangers of cyclic existence and aspire to free yourself from it. As your heart opens to others more and more, the thought of attaining awakening for the benefit of all beings will grow in your heart. In this way, you will progress on the path in an organic way.

While Buddhism speaks about the importance of preparing for future lives, this does not mean we should disregard this life. If we want to have favourable future lives, properly taking care of this life by being an honest person who refrains from harming or cheating others is important. By keeping good ethical conduct, we will have fewer problems in this life and will create the causes for fortunate future lives.

The paths practiced by these three levels of practitioners are not separate paths. One person passes through all three stages as he or she progresses. To remove the cognitive obscurations preventing full awakening, we first must remove afflictive obscurations and free ourselves from the sufferings of cyclic existence. To attain liberation by severing the afflictions from their root, we must first rein in the at-

tachment to the happiness of this life, which stimulates us to engage in the ten destructive paths of action.[45] In this way, the practitioners of initial, middle, and advanced capacities refer to one person at three different times in their spiritual journey. Such a practitioner gradually and sequentially develops the three different levels, each one indispensable for those that follow.

On the other hand, the practice for each of these three individuals is complete. If, at present, we wish only for a fortunate rebirth, we will find a complete method to actualise our aspiration in the path of the initial-capacity practitioner. On the basis of first practicing the initial level, middle-level practitioners will find a complete path to fulfil their aspiration for liberation in the practice of the middle level. If we seek full awakening, we will proceed through all three stages by first practicing the first two stages, which will lead us to practice the advanced path. For advanced practitioners, the first two paths are said to be "paths in common with initial-capacity practitioners and middle-capacity practitioners" because they are not exclusively for the initial- and middle-capacity practitioners.

"In common with" also indicates that advanced practitioners aiming for full awakening do not practice the initial and middle paths exactly the same way as initial and middle-level practitioners do. While initial-level practitioners are satisfied with aspiring to improve the quality of their lives in cyclic existence, practitioners aiming for full awakening have a more extensive aspiration right from the beginning. Although they lack the realisation of bodhicitta, they do all the initial and middle-level practices with some degree of bodhicitta.

As a commentary on the *Lamp of the Path*, Tsongkhapa's *Lamrim Chenmo* followed Atiśa's presentation. The Sakya tradition also follows Atiśa's sequence when it presents abandoning four attachments. The first Sakya patriarch, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, in "Parting from the Four Clingings" says:

> If you cling to this life, you are not a Dharma practitioner;
> if you cling to the three realms, that is not renunciation;
> if you cling to self-interest, you are not a bodhisattva;
> if grasping arises, it is not the view.

Here, we begin by freeing ourselves from the eight worldly[46] concerns that focus on the happiness of only our present life. By abandoning them, we will become an actual Dharma practitioner. We then cultivate renunciation of saṃsāra and the determination to be free from birth in all three saṃsāric realms.[47] Contemplating that all other sentient beings suffer in saṃsāra just as we do, we broaden our perspective and generate the altruistic intention of bodhicitta. To fulfil bodhicitta's aim of

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[45] The **ten destructive paths of action** include three physical actions (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct), four verbal actions (lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, idle chatter), and three mental actions (covetousness, harmful intent, wrong views). These actions are considered destructive because they cause suffering to oneself and others, leading to negative karma and hindering spiritual progress.

[46] The **eight worldly concerns** consist of four pairs:

- Delight at receiving money and possessions and dejection at not receiving or losing them
- Delight with receiving praise and approval and dejection when receiving criticism or disapproval
- Delight with fame and a good reputation and dejection when infamous and notorious
- Delight with pleasurable sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tangible objects and dejection with those that cause unpleasant feelings

[47] The **three saṃsāric realms** are the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm. These categorise all states of existence in saṃsāra, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The desire realm is characterised by strong desires and attachments, the form realm by subtler forms of existence with less gross desire, and the formless realm involves even subtler states of consciousness without physical form. These realms illustrate the various levels of existence and suffering, guiding the practice towards liberation.

attaining full awakening, we must gain the correct view of the two truths and abandon all grasping[48] at the two extremes of inherent existence and total nonexistence by realising emptiness. In this way, this short verse from the Sakyapas reflects the same approach of three ascending levels of motivation for Dharma practice presented by Atiśa.

The fifth-century Theravādin master Buddhaghosa thought along the same lines when he described inferior, medium, and superior levels of ethical conduct:

> . . . that [ethical conduct] motivated by craving, the purpose of which is to enjoy continued existence, is inferior; that practiced for the purpose of one's own deliverance is medium; the virtue of the perfections practiced for the deliverance of all sentient beings is superior.

Ethical conduct and other Dharma practices motivated by a desire for a good rebirth in cyclic existence, while virtuous, are inferior. Practices done with the wish to liberate ourselves from cyclic existence are excellent but not supreme; the perfections that are done with the wish to liberate all sentient beings are superior. While initially our motivation may be limited, as our wisdom and compassion expand, our motivation will as well.

The Four Truths and Three Levels of Practitioners

Describing the four truths[49] from the perspective of the three levels of practitioners helps us understand the motivation, aim, and practice of each level.

For an initial level person who aspires for a good rebirth and happiness in cyclic existence, true duḥkha refers to coarse suffering, especially the misery involved in unfortunate rebirths. The true origins of this duḥkha are the ten non-virtues and the coarse afflictions that motivate them, ie covetousness, malice, and wrong views. True cessation is the temporary freedom from an unfortunate rebirth. The true path to attain that is abandoning the ten non-virtues and engaging in the ten virtues.

For a person of middle capacity, who aspires for liberation, true duḥkha is the five aggregates of a saṃsāric being[50] that are taken under the influence of afflictions and karma. True origins are the afflictive obscurations that cause rebirth in cyclic existence. True cessation is the freedom from all such rebirth, or more precisely the ultimate nature of the mind that has abandoned all afflictive obscurations by applying the true paths. True paths are āryas' realisations held by the wisdom that directly realises emptiness.

For a person of advanced capacity, who aspires for full awakening, true duḥkha is one's own lack of omniscience and the duḥkha of all sentient beings. True origins are the cognitive obscurations and the self-centred attitude. True cessation is the cessation of cognitive obscurations at buddhahood, or more exactly the ultimate nature of the mind that has abandoned all cognitive obscurations by applying the true path. True paths are āryas' realisations held by the wisdom directly realising emptiness and bodhicitta.

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[48] "Abandon all grasping" refers to the practice of letting go of attachment and clinging to the self, phenomena, and concepts, recognising their impermanent and empty nature. This fundamental aspect of practice aims to reduce suffering and ego-centric behaviours, fostering a deeper understanding and experience of the interconnectedness of all things and leading towards enlightenment.

[49] This is dukkha, this is the origin of dukkha, this is the cessation of dukkha, this is the way leading to the cessation of dukkha. The first two of the four truths pertain to the cause & result of birth in cyclic existence—ignorance & suffering. The last two truths pertain to the cause and effect of freedom from that duḥkha—the path and attainment of nirvāṇa.

[50] **Five aggregates**—form, feelings, discrimination, miscellaneous factors and consciousness. The form aggregate is our body and the other four aggregates constitute our mind.

More Than One Approach

Our ultimate goal is to attain buddhahood and become the Three Jewels ourselves. The Dharma Jewel consists of the last two of the four truths—true paths and true cessations. Our mind becomes the Dharma Jewel when we gain true paths and actualise true cessation. At this time we become the Saṅgha Jewel. When, motivated by bodhicitta, we fully actualise all true cessations, we become the Buddha Jewel. Thus, to understand the meaning of refuge in the Three Jewels, we need a deeper understanding of the Dharma Jewel, and this is based on understanding the four truths. Full understanding of the subtle aspects of true cessations depends on understanding the two truths[51]—veil and ultimate—especially the ultimate truth, the emptiness of inherent existence.

Atiśa's *Lamp of the Path* presents one sequence of steps to become the Three Jewels and the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras present another. Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realisations*, a treatise on the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, presents this sequence by means of eight clear realisations[52] that are characterised by seventy topics. The first clear realisation—the exalted knower of all aspects (omniscience)—has ten principal characteristics that define a buddha's mind: bodhicitta, instructions, etc.[53] Instructions begins with the two truths, which encompass all phenomena, followed by the four truths, ie the objects of practice. After this, taking refuge in the Three Jewels is discussed, followed by non-clinging, tireless effort, etc.

Haribhadra wrote Clear Elucidations, the most widely used commentary on the Ornament of Clear Realisations. In it he speaks of two kinds of practitioners: those of sharp faculties who are very intelligent and deeply analyse the meaning of the teachings, and those of more modest faculties who follow due to faith in the Buddha and the scriptures. The principal audience for Haribhadra's commentary is sharp-faculty practitioners, and the above sequence is especially useful for them.

The audience for Atiśa's Lamp of the Path is different. He wrote this text at the behest of the prince Jangchup Ö, who requested a teaching that was suitable for Tibetans—the vast majority of whom were Buddhists. He wanted instructions they could easily put into practice that would enable Buddhism to flourish once again in Tibet. In response, Atiśa outlined the sequence of the three levels of practitioners.

When I give general instructions on the Buddhadharma to educated people who are new to Buddhism, I prefer to use the sequence in the Ornament of Clear Realisations to present the overall structure of the Buddhist path, starting with the compassionate bodhicitta motivation and moving on to the instructions. This helps them to understand how various points fit into the framework. While I can't go into depth on these points with beginners, everyone appreciates the notion of compassion, so I speak of that first. I then briefly introduce the two truths so that people

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[51] The "**two truths**" refer to the conventional truth, which deals with everyday reality and interactions, and the ultimate truth, which concerns the ultimate nature of reality as empty of inherent existence. This framework helps navigate the practical aspects of life while also understanding deeper, more profound spiritual insights, guiding practitioners toward enlightenment.

[52] The **eight clear realisations** are exalted knower of all aspects (omniscient mind), knower of paths, knower of bases, complete application of all aspects, peak application, serial application, momentary application, and the resultant truth body (dharmakāya).

[53] The **ten points** that characterise the exalted knower of all aspects are mind generation (bodhicitta), spiritual instructions, four branches of definite discrimination, natural abiding lineage that is the basis of Mahāyāna attainments (buddha potential), the observed object of Mahāyāna attainment, the objective of practice, attainment through the armour-like practice, attainment through engagement, attainment through the collections, and definite emergence.

will be aware that the way things appear and the way they actually exist differ. From there, I go onto the four truths of the āryas, which establishes the framework for the path to liberation. In this context, turning to the Three Jewels for refuge and guidance makes sense. For this reason, in this series taking refuge in the Three Jewels will be presented in conjunction with the four truths rather than in the context of the initial-level practitioner, as in the lamrim presentation.

The order of presenting topics may differ. The Ornament of Clear Realisations briefly mentions the wisdom realising emptiness and then proceeds to bodhicitta; the Commentary on Bodhicitta presents emptiness first, followed by the cultivation of bodhicitta and the bodhisattva practice. This is the approach for intelligent disciples. Although bodhicitta comes later in the lamrim sequence, Śāntideva teaches it at the beginning of Engaging in the Bodhisattvas' Deeds so that all subsequent meditations and practices will be directed toward awakening.

No matter which order we learn bodhicitta and emptiness, it is helpful to cultivate an understanding of both even as we emphasise the practices of the initial and middle levels in our personal practice. In this way, our meditation on precious human life, death and impermanence, and so forth will be supported by some degree of bodhicitta and the wisdom understanding emptiness. In addition, our meditations on the topics of the initial and middle levels will increase our appreciation of and urgency to cultivate bodhicitta and practice the six perfections.

Teachings for a Contemporary Audience

Atiśa composed the *Lamp of the Path* with the needs of eleventh century Tibetans in mind. He did not go into detailed philosophical debates or extensive reasonings when writing that text because his audience already believed in the Buddha's teachings. They simply required a concise, straightforward teaching explaining how to practice from the beginning of the path up to awakening.

With Buddhism now spreading internationally, the audience is very different. These people need to hear the rational arguments proving rebirth, liberation, the existence of the Three Jewels, and karma and its effects that are found in the treatises of the great Indian sages. Without a clear understanding of these topics, their comprehension of the path to awakening will not be complete.

In lamrim notes written by the respected Geluk master Tseten Shabdrung (1910–85), he commented that when we contemplate a lamrim topic, we should integrate points from the major treatises on the Perfection of Wisdom and the Middle Way into our reflection. In this way our study of the great philosophical treatises and our lamrim practice will complement each other. This is the method used by the Kadam Shungpawa—the Kadam "great text" tradition headed by Geshe Potowa.[54]

An understanding of the principal subjects studied in the great monastic universities—the Perfection of Wisdom, Middle Way, Reasoning and Epistemology, Abhidharma, and Vinaya—is most helpful to facilitate our practice of lamrim. When Tibetans first began teaching Westerners, very few philosophical texts were trans-

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[54] The Kadam great text tradition principally studied six Indian texts: Āryaśūra's Garland of Jātaka Tales and the Collection of Aphorisms to cultivate devotion and take refuge; Asaṅga's Bodhisattva Grounds and Maitreya's Ornament of Mahāyāna Sūtras to learn meditation and the bodhisattva paths and stages; and Śāntideva's Engaging in the Bodhisattvas' Deeds and his Compendium of Instructions to learn the bodhisattva practices. From another perspective, the first two texts are studied in order to learn and observe karma and its effects, the second two to cultivate bodhicitta, and the last two to understand the correct view and realise emptiness. In addition to Potowa's great text tradition, there are two other Kadam traditions: the stages of the path tradition and the pith instructions tradition. The former principally studied lamrim texts, while the latter relied heavily on practice manuals and the oral instructions of their teacher.

lated into Western languages. Nowadays, more translations and study guides are available, making the study of these classical texts possible.

Some people may have heard that since lamrim encompasses all the teachings of the Buddha, it is sufficient to rely on it alone. This is true in the sense that the lamrim summarises the meaning of the great treatises so that someone who has spent years studying them can easily identify the important points for meditation. Those who have not studied these important texts will benefit from learning something about them.

Modest-faculty disciples rely more on faith, seeing the Buddha as a perfect spiritual master and lineage teachers from Nāgārjuna up to their own teacher as reliable spiritual mentors. These people are not as interested in in-depth study, whereas those of sharp faculties are curious and want to learn more. They question the meaning of the teachings they hear and read; they want to know why a particular sage explained the Dharma the way he did. Buddhism encourages us to investigate and explore. People who are curious, with a genuine wish to investigate the Dharma, are real followers of the Buddha. For these students, lamrim alone is not sufficient; they must rely on the great treatises.

If we lack proper understanding of the exact meaning of emptiness, true cessations, nirvāṇa, and awakening, what is the basis of our devotion? If we understand how it is possible to eliminate ignorance and afflictions completely, our conviction in the Buddha and reliance on his teachings will be firm. Without learning and contemplating the Buddha's teachings, it is difficult to clearly distinguish the Buddhist path from paths espoused by other teachers, and as a result our faith in the Three Jewels will not be firm.

The lamrim teaches us how to go for refuge in the Three Jewels by understanding their unique qualities not possessed by other spiritual guides. When we have this understanding, we naturally take refuge in the Three Jewels: no one needs to encourage us to do so, and no one can discourage us from taking refuge in them.

Value of the Stages of the Path

The lamrim's gradual, systematic approach to the path has many advantages.

We will see that the Buddha's teachings are not contradictory. If we compare the Buddha's advice to various disciples, we may think he contradicted himself. In some sūtras the Buddha said there is a self, in others he spoke of selflessness. In some scriptures he spoke of the importance of abandoning alcohol, in others he allowed it in particular, rare circumstances.[55]

Not only does the Buddha give different teachings for different individuals, his advice to one person will vary according to the circumstance at different times, depending on the distortions most prominent in that person's mind. Initially, some-

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[55] These differences occur because the Buddha guided sentient beings with vastly different dispositions and tendencies, at different levels of the path. His motivation was the same in all instances: to benefit the person and to gradually lead him or her to awakening. To fulfil this purpose, he tailored his instructions to suit the current capacity of each disciple. Saying that a self exists was a skilful way to guide people who fear selflessness. Later, when they were more spiritually mature, he clarified that there is no inherently existent self. For the vast majority of people, consuming intoxicants harms their spiritual practice and should be given up. For highly accomplished tantric practitioners who have renunciation, bodhicitta, and the wisdom realising emptiness, consuming a small amount of alcohol may benefit their meditation in particular circumstances.

This advice is not contradictory because the Buddha's motivation is the same in all cases. If a person walking on a narrow path with precipices on both sides is too close to the left precipice, a skilful guide will call out, "Go right!" But if she is too close to the right precipice, the guide will direct, "Go left!" Taken separately, these may seem to be contradictory instructions. However, when we understand the context and the long-term purpose, we see there is no contradiction and only benefit.

one may conceive of the self as a permanent, unitary, independent soul, in which case the Buddha will teach how to refute such a self. If at another time in her practice, she may conceive of the external world as independent from perception, the Buddha will teach the Cittamātra view that there is no external world distinct from the mind to help her dissolve that false grasping.

We will comprehend all of the Buddha's teachings as personal instructions. People mistakenly believe some scriptures are for study and others for meditation and practice. When we understand the step-by-step approach of the lamrim, we see that all teachings relate in one way or another to subduing defilements and cultivating good qualities and thus are relevant to our practice. Our mind is so complex and afflictions are so powerful that one practice alone cannot eliminate all afflictive mental states at once. The stages of the path is a systematic strategy for gradually overcoming destructive attitudes and emotions by instructing us in a variety of topics and meditation techniques to develop many different aspects of our minds.

Although the realisation of emptiness is the ultimate antidote to all afflictions, at the beginning of the path our understanding of emptiness is too weak to be an effective remedy. Applying some of the techniques that are specific to each affliction, such as those found in the mind-training teachings, enables us to subdue our gross anger, attachment, and confusion. This more pacified state of mind, in turn, is more conducive to meditating on emptiness.

The broad layout of the lamrim enables us to understand how all the various teachings fit together in a cohesive whole designed for one person to practice. This helps us avoid pitfalls and detours and know how to integrate all key points of the path into our practice in a balanced way so we can fulfil our spiritual aspiration.

We will discover the intention of the Buddha. The Buddha's ultimate intention was to fulfil all beings' aspirations for fortunate rebirth, liberation and full awakening. The structure of the stages of the path shows how to achieve these aims.

We will be deterred from the great error of rejecting the Buddha's teachings. Since buddhas and bodhisattvas teach all aspects of the path to lead diverse sentient beings to awakening, we should respect all of the Buddha's teachings.

Knowledge of the stages of the path enables us to understand and respect the practices of other Buddhist traditions as well as the people who engage in them. Knowing the three spiritual aims of sentient beings—fortunate rebirth, liberation, and awakening—as well as meditations to cultivate these aims and the meditations to achieve them, we know where in this schema a specific teaching belongs.

Two Aims and Four Reliances

In this chapter, we focused on the broad perspective of the lamrim and how that gradually leads a person to full awakening. Now we will synthesise the path into two aims and then examine the four reliances that are important for fulfilling the lamrim's ultimate purpose, the attainment of full awakening. Nāgārjuna says:

> Due to having faith, one relies on the practices;
> due to having wisdom, one truly understands.
> Of these two, wisdom is foremost,
> but faith must come first.
> One who does not neglect the practices
> through attachment, anger, fear, or confusion
> is known as one with faith,
> a superior vessel for the highest good.

These verses express the **two aims of the Buddhadharma**—the attainment of higher rebirth and the highest good (liberation and awakening). Attaining a higher rebirth corresponds to the initial motivation in the lamrim, while attaining the highest good fulfils the middle or advanced motivation. As the means to attain these, the Buddha taught two methods: faith and wisdom respectively. The obstructions to these two goals are two kinds of ignorance: the **ignorance of the law of karma** and its effects and the **ignorance of the ultimate nature of reality**. To eliminate these, the Buddha instructed us to cultivate understanding of **two types of dependent arising**: the understanding of **causal dependence** and the understanding of **dependent designation**.

By meditating on **causal dependence**, we understand our happiness and suffering arise from virtue and non-virtue. Faith is required to accept the subtle details of karma and its effects, which is an obscure phenomenon that cannot be known directly by our senses. With trust in karma and its effects, we will rein in gross attachment, anger, fear, and confusion, and thus will cease non-virtuous actions and engage in virtuous ones. In this way, we will attain a fortunate rebirth in the future.

The understanding of **dependent designation** leads to the realisation of emptiness. That wisdom is the antidote to the ignorance of the ultimate nature and will eradicate all obscurations completely. By cultivating our understanding of the complementary nature of dependent designation and emptiness, we will be able to attain liberation and awakening.

AIM	MEANS	OBSTACLES THAT ARE PACIFIED	MEDITATION ON DEPENDENT ARISING
Higher rebirth	Faith	Ignorance of karma and its effects, gross afflictions	Causal dependence leading to ethical conduct
Highest good	Wisdom	Ignorance of the ultimate nature of reality, all obscurations	Dependent designation, complementing the realization of emptiness

There is a lot to contemplate in these two short verses by Nāgārjuna. When we examine them carefully, we find that they contain the entire path to awakening.

Of the two purposes for engaging in the Buddhist path, the highest good is foremost. To attain it, the wisdom realising the empty nature of phenomena is essential. This wisdom is not gained through blind belief or through prayer but by reason. The four reliances—found in the *Sūtra on the Four Reliances* and the *Sūtra Unraveling the Thought*—guide us in doing this.

1. Rely principally not on the person but on the teaching.
2. With respect to the teaching, rely not on mere words but on their meaning.
3. With respect to the meaning, rely not on the interpretable meaning but on the definitive meaning.
4. With respect to the definitive meaning, rely neither on sense consciousnesses nor on conceptual consciousnesses but on the nondual wisdom that realises emptiness directly and non-conceptually.

The four reliances illustrate a gradual progression in a practitioner's development. Here "rely" means to mentally rely on that which is a source of reliable knowledge, non-deceptive and reasonable to trust. Throughout the path, we must rely on a teacher, learning first the words of the teaching and then understanding their meaning. Regarding the meaning, we rely first on the meaning of the interpretable teachings that describe the stages of the path and the coarser views of selflessness, and then the meaning of the definitive teachings that describe the complete view of emptiness. When we meditate on emptiness, our initial understanding is with a conceptual consciousness. Through familiarisation with emptiness, we break through the veil of conception and attain direct, non-conceptual, non-dualistic perception of emptiness.

To explore these in more depth:

1**. Rely principally not on the person but on the teaching.** Here "person" refers chiefly to ordinary beings who teach many different paths they have heard from others, misunderstood, or made up. Rather than depend on people whose minds are under the influence of ignorance, it is wiser to depend on scriptures taught by the Buddha that explain non-deceptive methods to attain awakening. Instead of "The person who taught this is exceptional" as a reason to follow a teaching, we should apply reason to examine the words and meaning of the teaching.

Even with the Buddha, not everything he said should be taken literally. Sometimes he taught a provisional view as a skilful means to lead a particular individual or group to the final path. To some people, he taught the tathāgatagarbha theory, which, taken literally, seems to affirm the existence of a permanent self. However, the meaning in the Buddha's mind was the ultimate nature of the mind—its emptiness of true existence—which is permanent. Although such teachings are <u>not</u> to be taken literally, they are considered non-deceptive because the meaning in the Buddha's mind is true and reliable. Similarly, when the Buddha taught nihilists that there is a self-sufficient substantially existent person, his words are <u>not</u> to be taken literally. He taught this so they would not deny karma and its effects and understand there is a self that carries karma to future lives and experiences its effects.

2. With respect to the teaching, rely not on mere words but on their meaning. If we are attentive to only the words of a teaching, we may neglect its meaning. This inhibits its ability to guide us on the right path. Instead of thinking we understand a topic simply because we can use complex academic terminology and language, we should use our intelligence to understand the meaning of the teaching. We should also focus on the meaning in the Buddha's mind, not on words that can be misunderstood when taken literally.

When we want to understand the non-deceptive mode of existence of all phenomena, rather than rely on teachings about bodhicitta and the Buddha's qualities, we should rely on teachings on the emptiness of inherent existence, which is the object of exalted wisdom. This wisdom has the ability to cut the root of saṃsāra. Furthermore, we should rely on reason and cultivate reliable cognizers[56]—non-deceptive minds that know their object correctly.

Although the four reliances are taught specifically in relation to realising emptiness, the first two apply to learning any Dharma topic. Instead of being charmed by an ordinary person's charisma, we must listen to what he or she teaches. In ad-

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[56] to perceive, become aware of, or know

dition, rather than becoming enchanted with lofty sounding words, we must contemplate their meaning and try to understand them.

3. With respect to the meaning, rely not on the interpretable meaning but on the definitive meaning. "Interpretable meaning" refers to veil truths[57]—which include all objects that exist and function in the world. To understand the liberating teachings on emptiness, we must rely not on texts that speak about veil truths (ie the defects of cyclic existence or the benefits of bodhicitta). Although these teachings are important and necessary to actualise the path to full awakening, they do not express the ultimate nature. We should also avoid taking veil truths (ie the multifarious objects of the senses) as the true mode of existence but understand that they mistakenly appear inherently existent, although they are not. The meaning to rely on is phenomena's subtlest mode of existence, their absence of inherent existence. Since all phenomena lack inherent existence, their emptiness is called the "one taste" of all phenomena.

4. With respect to the definitive meaning, rely neither on sense consciousnesses nor on conceptual consciousnesses but on the nondual wisdom that realises emptiness directly and non-conceptually. When progressing on the path to liberation in accord with the Buddhadharma, we should not be satisfied with conceptual understanding of emptiness but continue to meditate until we gain an unpolluted wisdom consciousness that directly and non-conceptually realises emptiness. From the perspective of this wisdom, there is no dualistic appearance of a cognising subject (the person or the consciousness) or of a cognised object (in this case emptiness). While gaining the correct conceptual, inferential realisation of emptiness is essential, it is not the culmination of the process of realising the ultimate nature. Ordinary beings as well as āryas can have profound conceptual understanding, but we must seek to gain an ārya's non-conceptual wisdom that arises in the wake of analytical meditation on emptiness. To do this, we must look beyond the appearances to our sense consciousnesses and our conceptual mental consciousness of the aggregates and so forth that are the substrata of emptiness (ie, the objects whose ultimate nature is the emptiness of inherent existence). Instead we must cultivate a direct, yogic reliable cognizer of emptiness (a mind that perceives emptiness free of conceptual appearances). This mind knows its own ultimate nature. Emptiness directly appears to this mind, and the mind non-conceptually ascertains it. At this time, the appearance of subject and object ceases, and the mind and emptiness become undifferentiable, like water poured into water.

The progression illustrated by the four reliances indicates that we must not be complacent with one level of understanding but continue until we gain direct experience of the path and actually free our mind from defilements.

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[57] **Veil truth**. Appears true from the perspective of the mind grasping true existence. Also called conventional truth.