

The Lower Realms
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Summary of Previous Talks

We are now in the middle of this series of teachings, on how to go from confusion to enlightenment, starting off from where we are, which isn't the end of the path, but the beginning. We talked about our precious human life and the opportunity that it affords, all the good qualities it has. Then the real purpose of our life, how difficult it is to attain, that we can really make use of this opportunity to tap into our Buddha potential, to reveal it, to make our lives meaningful for others. And yet this life doesn't last so long: it goes by very, very quickly.

I remember when I was little, one year seemed like forever, from one birthday to the next, those presents just didn't come in fast enough. But now as an adult, the years go very quickly. Death is the inevitable result of having taken birth, so death is something we will have to face someday. Everybody faces it, there's no way around it. But if we can prepare for it, then death need not be a frightening thing. It can be actually a blissful thing.

Last week I told you about one monk in Dharamsala who died; how he was able to really relax, and transform the whole process into a way of understanding emptiness and generating the altruistic intention. He died very wonderfully. So we have to look at our own life and see if we have created the cause to die in a similar way because everything that happens in life doesn't happen accidentally. Things don't just happen out of nowhere; they happen due to causes. This is a very scientific thing -- things happen due to causes. So we have to examine the causes we've created as an indication of what kinds of things are likely to happen in the future.

At death time, what happens is that our consciousness starts to separate from this body. Life starts when the consciousness and this body are joined together. Dying is when they are starting to separate and death is when that separation is complete and the consciousness goes on to take some other body influenced, of course, by previous actions.

So this shows that we are not our body. This is a big thing especially for us Westerners because we are so attached to the body. So much of our ego identity is wrapped up in this body and yet we really aren't our body. Our body changes moment to moment. When we think back about being a little kid, it's hard to even imagine what it was like having an infant body. And it would be equally hard to imagine having a body that's ninety-five years old and a mind that's senile. And yet that's perfectly within the realm of possibility. We aren't our body, though the consciousness changes a lot depending on the body. Similarly after death, when it takes another body, we'll be influenced by the physical structure of that body as well. What body we take in our future lives depends on the causes that we've created before – in the previous lives or this lifetime.

Ripening of Karma at Death Time

What karma ripens at the time of death that will throw us into another body depends also on causes. At death time, it is not that the sum total of positive and negative actions are put on a scale and somebody says, "OK! Well, you are a bit on the heavy side, you go down." There's nobody judging, there's nobody determining; nobody's running the show and punishing people. Things just happen due to causes and conditions. So likewise, the karma isn't added up but rather, in one lifetime we have many, many different kinds of karmic seeds.

Take today: so many different thoughts, so many different actions and so many resulting imprints. Throughout the day, we are constantly acting mentally, physically, verbally, constantly leaving energy traces or imprints on our mindstream. All the different actions we've done. Which of those are going to manifest and ripen at that time? Not all of them can. Certain ones will, and these are the ones, by their seeds growing, that will propel our consciousness into a certain kind of body in a future lifetime.

(a) The first kind of imprints that are very likely to ripen at death are from *very powerful actions*. If we've done some very, very powerful actions even one time, eg the five extremely negative actions (killing one's father or mother, or causing schism in the Sangha community, etc), these are the ones that manifest first, because they're so heavy, they're so weighty, they're so potent. Similarly, if one does a very powerful positive action, eg actions done with very, very strong altruism or in relationship to the Triple Gem, it has a good opportunity of being the foremost one to manifest or ripen at the time of death.

(b) Now, if there are no outstandingly powerful actions at death time, then the ones that are very likely to ripen are the ones that are *more habitual*. Because just by the force of doing something habitually, it builds up a real weight in the mind. You can see it with any habit you have now in this life. Very small habits, by the fact of our doing them over and over again, become very strong and difficult to break e.g. habitually getting angry or lying or habitually making offering or being kind.

(c) And what conditions a lot of the ripening of karma at death time is the *thoughts that we have* while we're dying. This is a very, very important thing. You can see that even now when we're awake, if our mind is calm and peaceful, things go better in our environment and our experience, than when our mind is turbulent. Similarly, at death time, if the mind is filled with clinging and attachment -- not wanting to leave this life, clinging to relatives, clinging to the body; or if the mind is filled with anger -- anger at dying, anger at things that happen years ago; if the mind is disturbed in that kind of way at the time of death, then that acts like the fertilizer so that the negative karmic seeds can grow.

That's why we say when somebody is dying or when we're dying, to try and keep the room really peaceful and calm, not to generate attachment or aversion or anxiety in a person when they're dying.

And so our Dharma practice is especially important at death time. Because if the mind is able to be in a very positive state, e.g. we can remember our teacher or the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha at the time we die, we can generate loving kindness. If we can think of emptiness, then the mind is in a very positive state, and that also is the fertilizer which encourages the ripening of previously created positive actions.

Squarely Facing the Possibility of Rebirth in the Lower Realms

The next point we go into here in this sequence, is the meditation on the lower realms. We talked about the preciousness of life, the inevitability of death and how to make our life meaningful. Then we have to consider what kind of rebirth we can have after we die, either an upper one or a lower one.

Of course, we would all much rather like to think about upper rebirths, pleasure etc. But it's also good to be realistic and ask what happens if things don't go so well. If we really look at the karma we've created in this lifetime and if we're *very honest with ourselves* -- has the amount of positive karma exceeded the amount of negative karma? Which do you have more of? Which is more likely to ripen? If we really look and think about the different destructive actions, which ones we've done, and which ones we've actually succeeded in abandoning, we might come to realize that because cause and effect works, there is a chance that we will take an unpleasant rebirth simply because we've created the cause for it.

We all like to think of things that are beautiful and wonderful. We tend to block out things we consider disagreeable. In other words, if something is nice, then I like to think about it and I believe it; but if it makes me feel uneasy inside, then I don't believe it. In other words, we are using as the criteria: what we believe or don't believe, whether we like it or not. That's not a real wise criteria to use to evaluate what exists and doesn't exist. Because what we like or don't like isn't always such a reliable thing about evaluating things. That just shows our personal preferences, our mental blocks and our biases. So you really have to have a little bit of a courageous mind to examine the possibility of lower realms.

When we listen to descriptions of lower realms and rebirth, we have to try and free ourselves from our Judeo-Christian upbringing. Because I find that in teaching Westerners, that often is one of the biggest blocks people have because we tend to look at Buddhism and project Christian meaning onto it and then we sometimes get quite confused. So, it's important to remember when we are talking about this, that lower rebirth is not a punishment. Nobody else sends us there, and it's not taught in order to make us afraid or intimidated.

So the question may come, why did the Buddha teach about unfortunate states of rebirth? People often say maybe he is just doing it to try and scare us into being good. And you can see very clearly how this is our Christian upbringing; scare tactic to make us be good because we are

naughty little kids. The Buddha didn't need to teach us things to make us fearful and terrified. There is enough fearful and terrifying things in our lives. The Buddha didn't need to teach about it. That's not why the Buddha taught about lower realms and rebirth. There's no purpose in our becoming terrified. Absolutely no purpose at all.

Rather the Buddha taught this out of compassion, out of his care for us. Because he was able to see that within our mindstreams, there may exist the cause to take that kind of rebirth, and if we can learn about it beforehand, then we can purify that cause and we can stop creating more causes for it. It's like if there is a bomb in your car and you don't know it, somebody may come and tell you about it and if you say, "Oh, he is telling me that to make me afraid." I don't know what will happen next. Whereas if you realize this person is warning you about something serious because they care, then you will take action to do something about it.

And it's important also, in order to develop genuine love and compassion for all beings, which is something we really want to do in our hearts, to be able to reflect on their sufferings and miseries, e.g. the misery they experience being born in unfortunate realms. How can we be in touch with their misery of being born there if we don't even want to think about the existence of those realms or even acknowledge our own possibility of being born there. So in order to *tap into the pain that others experience* so that we can generate genuine compassion for them, we have to also be willing to contemplate our own problems and sufferings. Otherwise, love and compassion is just Pollyanna¹ goody-goody smiling things but we don't have any guts when it comes to looking at anything unpleasant. If we have a weak mind like that, how can we possibly benefit others?

Types of Lower Realms

People often have a lot of doubt too about the existence of lower realms and rebirths because we generally talk about three unfortunate kinds of rebirth.

1) One is as an *animal*, those we can see with our eyes and we really can't deny the existence of animals. We can of course think, "How can I, being a human be born as an animal?" But again, we have to tap into the fact we aren't our body and just think of all the different shapes your body has been in since conception until ninety-five years old. And then we come to see we really aren't our body. We can see that animals have consciousness and mind, they experience pain and pleasure and so they are living beings just like us, just the consciousness that's born in that kind of body. So likewise, our consciousness can take that kind of rebirth too. So, that's a little bit easier to understand because at least we can see animals.

2) The other two unfortunate realms we don't often see. The next one is *hungry ghosts*, or *preta* in Sanskrit and this realm consists of beings who experience extreme hunger and thirst and it also include spirits. When people do channeling, they sometimes channel spirits from this unfortunate realm.

3) And then the third lower realm is the one of extreme pain and suffering. Sometimes it's called the *hellish realms* or *hell realms* and is characterized by extreme heat or cold, very much physical agony in that realm.

So when we hear the descriptions of these, we sometimes say "Okay, animals exist, but the hungry ghosts and the hell realm?"

Understanding of Existence : Types of Phenomena

Now, we have to remember here that there are three different kinds of phenomena. Often they break phenomena into three different kinds.

Manifest Phenomena

Those are the ones we can contact directly with our senses, like the table is a manifest phenomenon; the carpet or the lights, something like that. Animals are manifest phenomena, we can see that.

Hidden Phenomena

Then there's one that's called hidden phenomena, these are things that we understand through inference. For example, emptiness or lack of inherent existence comes in this category. Because at first we understand emptiness through logic, through inference and then later we get to it with direct perception.

Extremely Hidden Phenomena

And then the third is called extremely hidden phenomena and these are things that we come to understand through accepting somebody else's word on it because that person is very knowledgeable and has no reason at all to deceive us.

So you can see that there are different kinds of things that we know in different ways. The table, we know from direct perception. The lack of inherent existence, we first have to use logic and then go to direct perception. And then other things, let's say like the realms of the hungry ghosts or the hell beings, those might be manifest phenomena for the beings living inside of them. But for us, maybe they are the extremely hidden kind and we have to rely on the word of somebody else to understand them and then keep checking it out to see if it makes sense for us.

And so if the Buddha has somehow touched your heart in some way and some of his words have seemed true to you, then that gives a little bit more space in the mind to begin to consider, let's say, the existence of lower realms that we can't see. We might try and think about, or provisionally accept them because the Buddha described them and we can see he tends to know what he's talking about and he tends also to have a good motivation and he won't try and deceive us.

Getting back to this thing of we always want to hear very positive things. Somebody might say, maybe the Buddha didn't want to terrify us by explaining these unfortunate realms of rebirth but still, couldn't we get the same motivation to purify and to develop our good qualities if he just explained the positive things to us? If we got positive reinforcement rather than negative ones, wouldn't that work? In some ways, yes it does work. For example, when we hear about the qualities of the Buddha and we get some inspiration, "Oh yeah, I can become like that, that's nice to think about, I can do it, I want to do it."

But then let's think about some other situations in which we hear about the positive effects but that still doesn't work to motivate us very well.

Like somebody who is very overweight, they go to the doctor and if the doctor says, "You'll feel so much better if you lose weight." They say, "Yes, yes," and they go home and have a piece of chocolate cake. They know, "Yeah, I'll feel better," and that's the positive kind of motivation, but somehow, it doesn't move them to actually lose the weight. Whereas, if the doctor says, "Look, you're going to get a heart attack if you don't lose some weight." Then the person becomes a bit apprehensive and they go home and they go on a diet.

So sometimes hearing about the negative consequences can motivate us in ways that just hearing about the positive consequences can't. That's why it is important to think about these kinds of rebirth. Because let's face it, sometimes we get very, very lazy in our practice and we rationalize and procrastinate. Sometimes something like this, thinking about the possibility of a lower rebirth can be like cold water on the face and thereafter makes it extremely easy to practice. The mind is very motivated and we don't have that internal civil war going on anymore.

Lower Realms: Creation of the Mind?

Now, these different realms of existence, they are things that are dependently arising. They come into existence because the causes for them exist. Buddha did not create the lower realms. God did not create the lower realms. Nobody went, "I think this would be something good to have in Seattle." But rather the lower realms come into existence because the cause for them exists. And the cause is negative action. So, our own personal negative action is what creates our rebirth inside the hell realm. So you can see the hell realm, in some ways, is definitely created by the mind. Our actions are what propel us to take that kind of rebirth.

There's an interesting quote from Shantideva, a great Indian sage who said, "By whom were they zealously forged, these weapons of hell? Who made the burning iron ground and whence did the conflagration come?" And then he answered, "The sage (meaning the Buddha) has taught that everything like that is from the evil mind, there's nothing to be feared in the three realms apart from the mind."

In other words, it's our own mind that creates our existence in the lower realm. How does that happen? How does that arise? How can we get some kind of feeling that it's possible to take that kind of rebirth? What I find very helpful is if you can remember a time when you were really paranoid and very fearful, terrified, so freaked out and frightened, and due to your fear, there was a lot of anger as well, because we can see fear and anger really go hand-in-hand. And if you can remember a time in your life when you were like that, and then imagine that mental state, imagine getting stuck in that mental state. So stuck in that fearful, paranoid, angry mental state, that everything you saw, you saw through that filter. So stuck in that mental state that if that mental state began to manifest externally, as your environment and as your body, that would be what the hellish realm is like.

That experience is just so intensified that that's how everything appears to you. We can see even people in a human body, if somebody has a very disturbed mind, even though nobody else is trying to harm them, they see harm. Even though there's no danger, they're terrified -- we can see very clearly, can't we? Imagine just that mind getting so exaggerated, so huge that it really did turn into the environment and the body. So that even if somebody took you out of that environment and put you in another one, you'd still see things exactly the same way, because the mind is so stuck.

Or, remember a time in your life when you've really clung onto something, remember when you had so much craving and clinging and wanted something so badly, and you didn't have it, but your mind was completely obsessed. You couldn't function because your mind was so totally stuck.

Like sometimes when relationships break up, how the mind is just completely stuck on the other person and you can't think about anything. There's so much clinging, attachment and frustration. Now, imagine that mental state, again, getting stuck in it, and it grew so huge, that that became your environment and became your body, so that your whole life experience was one of this clinging that was continuously frustrating. Everything you wanted evaded you, and your mind couldn't release, it was obsessed -- that is the realm of the hungry ghosts.

Or if you've ever had a time when your mind was really, really foggy, like when you had a hangover or when you've been anaesthetized, when you knew you could think better but you couldn't do it, ever had that feeling? Your mind just can't get it together, to put two and two together and it's just totally fogged up so that you can't think clearly, you can't make decisions, you can't act appropriately. Again, take that confused, very obscured state of mind and turn it into the environment, turn it into your body, turn it into your life experience, and that's basically what the animal realm is like -- a kind of fogged-up thinking.

If you really sit and think about it, what would it be like to be a fish? What does a fish think about all day? I mean there's this mindstream that has the Buddha potential, that has the complete ability to become a fully enlightened being, yet it's so obscured, so fogged-up, what can it do? Or, a cow. When you look in a cow's eyes. It's just incredible. I get a sense of like there's this being locked in that body, it wants to think and it can't think, all it can think about is hay, that's about it.

If we think in that way about mental states and their relationships to our environment and our body, we might begin to get a feeling of how it's possible for our mindstream to take that kind of rebirth. It isn't really that far out. It really isn't such an impossible thing. I remember His Holiness was teaching us one time and he said, "I really wish there weren't lower realms, I really wish these things didn't exist and I didn't have to teach about them."

Why Think about the Lower Realms?

Increase mindfulness to stop destructive behavior patterns

But that's not really the point -- what we wish existed or didn't exist. It is what is helpful for us to think about and learn so that we can take this knowledge and really use it in a wise way, so that we make our lives meaningful right now. Because by understanding these kinds of sufferings and other types of rebirths, it gives us tremendous impetus to purify and not to keep following our continual destructive behavior patterns. It's especially effective when you see yourself starting to act out another "here's another one of my tell-everybody-what-I-think-of-them days" or "here's another one of my cheat-everybody-days". When we start to get into our old behavior patterns, to just remember this is leaving the imprint on my mindstream, that could ripen into that kind of rebirth. Do I want that result? If I don't want that result, maybe I should think twice about telling this person off and losing my temper. Maybe I should think twice about cheating somebody in business, whatever it is.

So, it's very often helpful to think about the lower realms. It helps us break those kinds of things that we really don't like in ourselves anyway. Nobody really likes to lose their temper and tell people off, and yet we find it such a hard habit to break. If we could remember the effects that this will have on our future lives, it gives us a lot more self-control and energy not to act that kind of stuff out and then to do some kind of purification practice for any kind of behavior we've done in the past. So, thinking about this can be very, very beneficial, very strong effect on the mind.

Protect ourselves from sufferings in future lives

And so, just as we try and protect ourselves from even the slightest suffering now in this life, we should try and protect ourselves from the possibility of future sufferings in other lives. If we can't endure, like if we sit down and meditate in a place where it's too cold, and if you go into the Cascades, in an unheated cabin and you try and meditate, can you do it? No way! Or, if you have to sit on top of a wood stove and meditate, can you do it? Again no, we can't stand the pain, there's no possibility to concentrate because the physical pain is too intense. Or, if we didn't eat for one day, is it easy to meditate? Is it easy to concentrate? Very difficult. If it is difficult in this life to do virtuous things if we're too hungry or too tired or too hot or too cold, then in future lives, if our whole life gets stuck in that environment, how can we practice?

So, if we have the possibility now to eliminate the causes for that, then it is well worth our while to be cautious. Not kind of proud or arrogant, "Well, that stuff is just to make you afraid, so I don't believe in it!" But to take it to heart because it can really invigorate our practice a lot. If we try and prevent even a small suffering that we might experience tomorrow, why don't we try and prevent a larger suffering that we could also experience tomorrow—in case we happen to die between today and tomorrow. Who knows? We could! It makes sense to do that.

Transform our minds

Another way to think about the existence of the lower realms, is that you can think about your mind. I mean, if we do have some faith that we have the Buddha potential and that if we practice well, our mental state can get better and better. That is, if we develop our loving-kindness, develop our patience, our generosity, our wisdom, our mind can get better and better, it can get happier and happier. What happens if we don't do that? And we develop our anger, our jealousy, our pride and our attachment. Well, in a similar way, then our mental state just degenerates.

So it would be really illogical to think, "Oh yes, yes, my mind can become a Buddha but it can't become an animal or it can't become a hungry ghost." Because we can see what we become is completely dependent on our mental states, on our mental habits, what kind of things we cultivate. And we can cultivate either the good qualities or we can just let bad qualities run the show. It's completely up to us, our whole experience that follows is a result of our own mental states.

Our mental states do affect our body, even in this body. People who have ulcers and high blood pressure, it's related to the mental state, isn't it? So it's very wise in this way to see the connection between the body and the mind. And that if we just let the mind go in whichever direction, our body in this life also will and our body next life also will. And if we take the time to develop our loving-kindness and patience, our body is affected in this life. They have all sorts of statistics in the medical profession about how people are healed from diseases so much more rapidly if they have a good mental state. So it does affect the body this life, it does affect the body in future lives. There is a relationship between body and mind.

Lower Realms: Mental state? Physical state? Illusion?

There are different explanations. Some people say, "Well, maybe the different realms are just mental states, they are not really physical places." Often people wonder about that. Well, the animal realm is definitely a physical realm, we can see that. The one about hungry ghosts and spirits, again it's quite interesting depending on what culture you live in. Because if you go to Asia, so many people have stories about spirits, it's not a big thing to people in Asia to believe in spirits. So many people had experiences with spirits. Maybe in the West we don't call it spirits, we label it something else, or attribute its cause to something else.

There is some discussion on whether these are actual physical places or not. Some people say they are actually physical places, like the hungry ghost realm, the hell realm. Maybe they are physical places but are they real or not real? Well, is this life real or not real? So in one way you could say, "Well, maybe it is as real as this karmically created life, because what we are perceiving in this life is also a creation of our karma. So maybe the environment is as real as the environment we are experiencing now."

Other Lamas say that, for example, the hell realm is purely karmically created, it's illusory. In other words, it's not a real physical place but it appears that way so strongly, so vibrantly because of one's karma. Like, when one has a hallucination or when you're dreaming, you are completely convinced this is reality. So hallucinations and dreams, they are illusory but we experience them as real. But the point is, they are also due to our mental states, aren't they? They are dependent on the mind. That's why Shantideva said there's nothing to fear in the three realms apart from the negative mind, because that is the thing that creates our environment and creates our whole perception of it. Let me pause here to see how you are doing so far.

Questions and Answers

1. Why are some phenomena extremely hidden?

Extremely hidden phenomena are extremely hidden because our minds are obscured, not because something is covering the phenomena, but because the mirror is dirty and it can't reflect what is out there. So what is it that dirties the mirror? It's what we call the deluded obscurations and the obscurations to knowing. If we understand the emptiness of inherent existence, that cuts the ignorance which then helps us to remove the deluded obscurations. As we meditate more and more on emptiness and on dependent arising, we are able to also clear away the subtle stains of the mind, the obscurations to knowing, and then it's like you have a completely clear mirror that just naturally reflects whatever it is that exists.

(In response to audience's comment) The Buddha would be able to perceive the hell realm directly, not that he or she would be in the hell realm experiencing pain, but he or she would be able to perceive the existence of that as something that was created by sentient beings' karma.

2. How can we get out of the lower realms?

First of all, getting the life we have now, the precious human life, is like half the battle won. Just to get this life is so fortunate. Compared to what it took us to get out of the lower realms to get here, getting from here to Buddhahood is almost the same thing.

Another way of looking at it, let's say you have a human being who creates all different kinds of karma, different actions, so that there are different seeds on their mindstream. Let's say when they die, their mind is really upset and angry because the hospital is charging them too much and they are all upset because they don't want their relatives to have to pay all the hospital bills after they die. So they die in that kind of mental state, a negative karmic imprint ripens, they get born in the lower realm. They stay in that lower realm only as long as the causal (karmic) energy is there. So the lower realms aren't permanent. They are not eternal, in the same way that our present life ends when the karmic energy for it runs out. Any kind of rebirth within cyclic existence ends at some point because the causal energy, the karmic cause, runs out.

Putting good imprints on our minds; also those of animals

Yet those persons, even though they are experiencing a lower rebirth, still have on their mindstreams the imprints from positive actions they did when they were human beings. So that is why very often if animals are dying, we say mantras on them. It puts a good imprint on their mind. If they have some good imprint already there, it can act as a fertilizer to make a good karmic imprint ripen at the time of their death. So people eventually will come out of the lower realms because they still have the good karmic imprints on their mindstreams and these can ripen later and give them a rebirth that is a god or a demi-god or as a human being.

Similarly, very often, you will see, like in the Tibetan community, people go on circumambulations around the different buildings or monuments. It's considered a very good thing to do, so they'll take their animals with them too.

When I lived in Dharamsala, I used to go out in the evenings and walk around the library and there was one puppy, that every evening, comes with me and walks around the stupa with me. And I thought, compared to other dogs, at least this dog had the possibility to somehow contact this building with all these holy objects in it as well as people around who said lots of mantra to it. It's possible to put good imprints on animals' minds. So for those of you who have pets, say mantras to your dog, your cat.

I remember one year in summer, Lama Zopa actually had a few of us nuns say prayers to his dogs everyday after dinner. And then there was one nun who was in charge of taking care of the puppies and she brought, especially these two dogs, to initiations -- I think those dogs went to more initiations than I did -- because Rinpoche was very concerned about good karmic imprint in their minds even though they couldn't understand anything at all.

3. How not to get stuck in a relationship?

Look at that person more objectively

If the mind gets really stuck in a relationship and can't let go, well, one thing is to try and look at that person more objectively and to recognize this is a person whose mind is obscured by disturbing attitudes and karma. What is so remarkable about this person? If we look at their minds, they get angry, they get attached, their minds aren't controlled, they are also controlled by their disturbing attitudes and karma. What's there to be attached to in a mind that can generate non-virtuous thoughts like that? Similarly, if we look at the person's body, what's there to be attached to? Because we look at the inside of the body – it's pus and blood and guts and all sorts of different things there. So what possible thing could we gain by being attached to this person's body and mind because neither of them is particularly enlightening.

This is not in our usual way of thinking negative thoughts. Like often when we are really attached to somebody and the relationship goes bad, then we get angry, but we're angry and we're attached at the same time. So our mind is picking faults but it's simply because our feelings are hurt. This isn't like that. There's no sense to angrily picking faults at people. It's rather just trying to understand the nature of sentient beings. And if we look, here's this sentient being who gets born, gets old and sick and dies, how can we take refuge in somebody like that? They are under the same influences that we are.

Stop thinking about him/her and switch to more constructive things

Instead of the mind getting really stuck, "Oh! I want to be with (that person)...", and saying that "mantra" -- "I want to be with them, why don't they love me, I want to be with them, why don't they love me". Switch it into "Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum..." Switch your attention onto something more constructive because you know the other thing is totally fruitless, just focus your mind on this mantra.

4. What kind of karmic imprints would ripen at the time of death?

It is basically in this order at the time of death: first, if there are very powerful actions they would ripen. In their absence, the habitual ones and then what's the condition at the time of death. But I think just by our attitude at the time of death, it is going to have a strong influence, regardless. Because if you have a really negative mind at the time of death, even though you may have created a lot of positive karma, it is going to have a hard time growing. Some people think, "It is very easy to generate positive mental states, so I'll just live my life the way I want and then at the time of death, I'll just think about the Buddha and it will all be okay because I can generate love and compassion when I die." Sounds good?

Cultivating positive mental states while alive

Difficulty is, there's a hitch here. If we have a really hard time generating constructive thoughts while we are alive and we have so many good, calm, nice conditions around us, what makes us think it's going to be so easy to do when we're dying and our bodily elements are all out of balance and our mind is experiencing this whole new situation? Isn't that a little bit arrogant to

think that we can do at death-time in a confusing situation what we can't even do now, when we sit in a nice, quiet room on our meditation cushion?

We do die pretty much as we have lived. Now it always is possible for good thoughts to arise at death time nevertheless, so we always do try, let's say if we are with somebody who doesn't know anything about the dharma practice, we still try very much to encourage them in a positive state of mind. But it would be a lot easier to do that if the person has created the cause for good thoughts to arise previously.

5. What happens if there's sudden death or somebody is in a coma before they die?

Well, in a sudden death, I think there is still the opportunity for some flash of something going on. You see you are going to crash and your mind does have some thoughts, it does generate different things. You can see even when you are startled, something happened and you jumped, there is a thought there, there is a reaction. So there is something going on.

In the case of a coma, I'm not completely convinced that people are totally out of it, because I have heard accounts, I have talked to people who have been in coma and they remember being quite conscious in coma. It is just that they could not communicate outward with everybody else. I talked to one woman. She said she was aware, she wanted to talk and say something and everybody was just standing around and saying, "Oh, look at her, she is in a coma." And yet she did have some connection. So I think still even then, something does go in. Or, even if the coma is so deep that they just have a very, very fuzzy awareness of what's going on outside, still, I think something does go in according to the environment. We can influence people who are dying in coma, or if we are in coma ourselves, to try as much as possible to control the mind.

6. What happens to people who commit suicide?

Well, usually when people commit suicide, they aren't very happy. And an unhappy mind is very fertile ground for the ripening of negative karma. Also, although suicide isn't a complete action of killing, it is some form of taking life, although it's not a complete action. So just the act of suicide itself puts a negative tendency, plus that mental state is one in which a person is often quite tortured mentally -- difficult to have a positive attitude. So that's why we usually say in Buddhism, suicide is a great tragedy. Because somehow, somebody's life still could be made meaningful if they could somehow find a way and a method to use, or if they could somehow pull themselves out of that hole where their mind's gotten stuck in and turn their mind to something else.

Considering suicide as the only honorable exit to save the family name is something completely created by the mind. Probably a function of delusion. That belief is totally a creation of human society and the human mind. Totally created by our conception. It might seem, in a particular culture, like that's what you do to save the family name, but it would really be, from a Buddhist view, considered a tragic action done out of ignorance.

(In response to question from audience) I can't remember, maybe, that the Buddha allowed an exception with arhats with terminal illness to commit suicide, so, become an arhat (laughter). The reason an arhat could do that kind of thing is because their mind is free from the cycle of rebirth and because they don't have negative attitudes. They wouldn't be doing it out of disturbing attitudes, and they wouldn't have the karma to throw them back into cyclic existence again.

7. What is the Buddhist view on euthanasia?

That's the point that is rather difficult to say. They usually say try and preserve life at all cost. But I remember when His Holiness is being asked about it, particularly regarding all the expense and

everything that is involved, he really says it's a difficult decision to make. It's a very difficult one, I don't think I can give a 100% clear answer.

My personal opinion is if somebody is a Dharma practitioner, to try and create an environment whereby either they can have an extended life so that they can try and create more good karma, or to have a way of dying peacefully so that they can have clarity at the time of death. Because to have clarity at death time is very important if one is a practitioner. If somebody isn't a practitioner, then if the life can be extended and if somebody says mantras and does something to put good imprint on their mind, that could be very beneficial for that person also. For the person who's just going to be hooked up to the machine and in a coma and no prayers, no mantras, no nothing, that may just put off the next rebirth whatever that next rebirth is going to be.

Quite difficult, especially when you get into the subject. It costs thousands of dollars a day to keep somebody alive on a respirator, couldn't the money be used to do something more for other sentient beings? I think the real key to that is in terms of government policy or social policy. That rather than putting so much money in one direction and creating all that possibility, maybe better from the beginning to put it in other directions, and have better prenatal care, better education, schooling and things like that.

8. What happens if we die with an indifferent or a cynical state of mind?

I think it would be much better to die with an indifferent state of mind than one full of attachment or anger. That way you wouldn't have so much obstacles. But still, an indifferent mind can be very, very obscured, it's hard to say exactly what kind of karma will grow in there.

Cynicism is a form of anger and belligerence, and it's also a form of pride, kind of a mixture of those two. That's a painful state of mind.

9. Do dreams have something to do with our past lives?

Could our dreams be actually like a memory of previous life? hell realms? I really think that that could very well happen and especially some kids from the time they are very young, have a lot of nightmares and I often wonder if maybe, they have just been born out of the hell realm. They have just finished that karma but there is some residual energy left that causes the nightmare. It's very possible.

Relationship between Karmic Actions and Lower Realms

Okay. Let me continue. There is actually quite a long explanation in the text, many pages about the hell realms, just what you want to hear, huh? (laughter) There're the eight hot hells, the eight cold hells, the four neighboring hells, and so on. I don't think I'll go into it in detail right now². (laughter)

(In response to question from audience) In the different god realms, each one of their days is like 500 of our years. And in the hell realms, each one of their days is like I don't know how many eons of our time. It can be a very long time being born in those realms. I think it just has to do with how one perceives time, though. Because we can see time isn't an externally existent thing, it's really a perception of the mind.

(1) Hell realm

In talking about the different kinds of hells, you can begin to get a feeling of how actions relate to the results.

(a) The 8 Hot Hells

(i) Reviving hell

There's burning iron ground and everybody that you share this environment with has weapons, and the people just fight and kill each other all day. Their bodies get chopped up by murdering each other. Even when their bodies fall apart in all these different pieces, each piece is still experiencing pain as they die. And then even after falling apart, their bodies join together again, they come alive and they start the trip all over again. This is like the ultimate dysfunctional relationship. Except it's a never ending war because you killed each other, but you don't really die, it's just all the pieces continue to experience pain and then the pieces join together and you go at each other's throat again.

So, what kind of beings are born in this kind of hell? Soldiers. It's like war. Being a soldier creates the karma to be born in that kind of hell. Or butchers. You can see, hacking apart others' bodies, or torturing others in any kind of way. You can see the linkage between that action and what kind of karmic appearance one gets later on.

(ii) Black Thread hell

The beings, their tongues are taken out and stretched and then ploughed. It's the result of lying. So you can begin to feel how cause and result go together in this kind of thing.

(iii) Crushing hell

There's another one, it's called the crushing hell, where they are chased into very narrow valleys and then they are crushed. They are crushed by things falling on them. This is for people who hunt animals or fish or smash insects. You can see the relationship between the action and the karmic appearance somebody has as a result of that action.

(iv) Howling hell

You're chased into a house made of burning metal that then starts to close in on oneself and you get squished in the middle. That's the result of taking intoxicants, alcohol and narcotic drugs, and things like that. The mind getting squished, isn't it?

(v) Loud Howling hell

(vi) Heating hell

(vii) Intense heating hell

People are boiled in cauldrons filled with molten copper and boiled alive and speared at the same time, and that's a result of throwing animals in hot, boiling water. I remember on my 21st birthday, we all went out for lobster, picked our lobsters and boiled them alive and I thought it was great. This is incredible because they talk about having bad friends and how bad friends aren't people with horns on their heads. They are often people who really wish you well, but they don't know about karma. So, there are all the different types of hells like these in which one experiences the karmic vision related to the actions one has done previously.

(viii) Hell of Unrelenting Pain

(b) The 8 Cold Hells.

They say the cause for rebirth in the cold hells is the frozen attitude of close-mindedness, stubbornly clinging on to wrong views. Like when our mind gets really stuck in this kind of cynical attitude, or really skeptical attitude, our minds are just stuck and frozen in our own wrong views, so it creates the karma to be born in the frozen hell.

(c) The 4 Neighboring Hells.

After you escape from the hot hells, after your karma for the hot hell is used up, there're four surrounding or neighboring hells that you have to go through to get out. So there's one of these neighboring hells where there's a tree, and the blades of the tree are knives and at the top of the tree, you hear one of your dear ones, somebody you really love calling out to you, somebody you are really attached to. As you hear their voice at the top of the tree with all the leaves that are made of knives facing down, you're trying desperately to climb up this tree with all these knives plunging into you and thorns on the bark sticking into you. And you get up there and of course it's completely a hallucination. You get up there and you hear their voice down at the bottom and again chasing after the thing of attachment, we start going down and all the knife leaves turn and the blades face up so we get impaled as we go down.

This is attachment. Wherever you try and go, when your mind is stuck in attachment, you get cut – external karmic reflection of what is going on internally.

(2) Hungry ghost realm

In the hungry ghost realm, there is a wide variety of hungry ghosts and some of them are helpful spirits, some of them are harmful spirits, some of them are beings who are completely tortured by supreme hunger and thirst their whole lives.

(a) Attachment

Whereas anger is one of the chief motivating things to cause one to be born in the hell realm because you can see the hell realm is so violent, in the hungry ghost realm, which is characterized by clinging and its consequent frustration, it is attachment that's the main thing which makes one be born there. Again, the mind that just gets stuck and so here, it's so stuck that the body is one with a huge enormous stomach, a very long thin neck that is tied in knots and the being is continually hungry and thirsty.

And what's so weird about this rebirth and just how karma obscures our mind, we can't see what's in front of our nose. Even if a hungry ghost stands in front of Green Lake, they can't see water. Or even if they have a vision of water in the distance and they run for it because they are so desperate, as soon as they get there, it appears to their mind as pus and blood. Because the *karmic obscuration* is so strong that the mind can't see.

We can really see that in our own lives. I'm sure we've all had experiences in which we have conceived of a situation one way and only years later did we look back and say, "Well, I put myself in so much misery looking at it like that." You think of times in your life when our frame of reference, our karmic obscuration was so strong that we create our own suffering. We can't even see what's there. Like somebody is trying to be kind to us, and all we see is somebody interfering with our lives. This is what the hungry ghost realm is like. This particular hungry ghost that suffers from hunger and thirst -- not all of them do -- they run, they can't even see the water. Or if they see the water and they get there, it becomes pus and blood. Or even if they are able to get some water and put it in their mouth, they can't get it down the throat because the throat is so thin and is tied in knots. And even if it goes down into the stomach, it bursts into flames somehow. It doesn't even satisfy or quench them.

You can see how this realm is exactly what it's like when we are really stuck in attachment, isn't it? When our minds are fixated with attachment, we can't see what's there. Always feeling frustration because we can't get what we want. Whatever we get, it isn't sufficient. Like one drop of water. Or somehow we get it, and we twist it, again it makes us miserable. Like the drop of water going in and then becoming flames.

So, being really stuck in attachment is the chief cause for being born in the hungry ghost realm. And of course refusing food to people or being stingy and hoarding food and this kind of stuff will be a cause for that kind of rebirth.

(b) Miserliness

Miserliness is another one of the chief causes, like miserliness of material things or miserliness of the dharma or our learning. In other words, if somebody wants to learn something from us, we don't want to share what we've learnt. Or we don't want to share the dharma with somebody who is interested. We are miserly, we are threatened by somebody else knowing as much as we do. That also creates cause for rebirth as a hungry ghost. They also say that knowing the dharma intellectually but ignoring cause and effect can be cause for rebirth in the hungry ghost realm. They even say that some of the spirits born in the sphere of hungry ghost realm can be excellent debaters. They can even know all the dharma vocabulary.

I remember, I knew somebody was going to a channeler and the spirit that was getting channeled was talking about dharma. Our teacher went and wanted to meet that spirit, I think the spirit might have been afraid to come at that time, but this would be a classic example of maybe somebody who memorized the dharma, knew all the words, but didn't practice, didn't put it into effect. So, it's all very intellectual, that imprint is all there, but because of having lived out a life of attachment, then getting a lower rebirth.

That's why they always really emphasize practice and good motivation.

(3) Animal realm

The general sufferings of animals are the suffering of heat and cold, getting eaten by each other, getting tortured and getting hunted by human beings. Animals experience all sorts of different things and if human beings experience some of those things, they would go to the government and protest for their human rights, but animals can't do that. Look at some of the ways the laboratory animals are treated, look at the farm animals, the chickens and the cows and how they are treated. We certainly wouldn't want to give up our body to feed somebody else, and yet the animals do that and they are given no choice about it. So, it's really quite an unfortunate rebirth. They have very little control of their own destiny, they have to work and be completely dependent on others.

The general cause for the animal rebirth is the foggy mind and close-minded bewilderment. Specifically things like lacking respect for spiritual mentors or religious objects, dharma books and things like that. In other words, out of our ignorance, mistreating or ignoring the virtues of other things, or having an aversion to the dharma. Again, you can see how that is a very ignorant mind - the dharma is here and the person runs the other way.

Or also, blind indulgence and very animal-like behavior. You can see some human beings act worse than animals. If we have a hard time imagining human beings being born as animals, just look at how some human beings act when they have a human body. Some of them really act worse than animals, so it doesn't seem like that big of a jump to get a body that matches their mental state, does it?

Reflections on the Lower Realms

Break bad habits

So I think it's really helpful to spend some time thinking about this. It might not be so pleasant but it's very sobering and it can add a really *big impetus to our practice*; to get us to think, again, about where we are going in our life and what purpose and function our life is and it can be a very strong motivator to break some of our bad habits.

Generate compassion

By thinking about this too, it can also help us to generate compassion for all the other living beings who are experiencing this or who are *creating the cause* to experience this. Sometimes we get into situations and we see people doing horrendous, harmful actions and we get angry at them. We get angry at Adolf Hitler for killing so many people. If we understand karma and we look at Adolf Hitler's life and the karma he was creating and the suffering that results from that, then, even though we can't condone what he was doing, we can get a sense of compassion for those who are so confused that they create suffering for themselves and others thinking that they are doing something good.

So if we understand these kinds of things, it also helps us to prevent getting angry at people who act negatively because we really understand how they are creating their own suffering. By having some compassionate feeling for them, then maybe we care, and we can intervene a little bit and try and help them to stop.

Energize us to practice

It's very valuable to think about this kind of thing, not just once but *repeatedly* of course. You can really use this a lot as you are going through the day. I do that when I take walks along Green Lake and I ran into all these geese and ducks and I sit there and I look at them and I think what would it be like to be born like that? What can you do with your mind? You really think of the suffering condition. Of course they get all sorts of delicious bread to eat. But to me, it's really terrifying to think of my mind being so obscured, not able to think, being so dulled over like that, to me that is a very frightening thing.

By remembering that, it gives us *some energy to really use the human mind* while we have it now, to use it for something constructive instead of watching TV. When you run into animals, instead of going "aren't you sweet", really try and put yourself in the animal's 'paws', so to speak. Think of what it would be like to have that rebirth. Again it helps us to generate compassion for that being and it helps us really appreciate our present potential and possibility.

Seek refuge

From thinking about the sufferings of the lower realms, we do get quite an uncomfortable feeling. Often the feeling comes inside of us also when we start to really look at the karma we've created our whole life, when we start to think of the consequences of it. We get a very uncomfortable feeling and we want to do something about it. We want a method to follow so that we can purify, so that we can stop creating that karma. We want some guidance and practice. And so that's why the meditation on refuge comes next because when we begin to see that we aren't in a nice, stable, secure position, we could die at anytime and we do have negative imprints in our mind, then we really start to seek refuge and we really begin to search out those who can guide us. And so we start thinking about why Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are reliable refuge and how they can guide us and how we can follow them.

We shouldn't just think about the sufferings of the lower realm and then sit there with this horrible feeling in the bottom of our stomach. We can use that to then take refuge with a mind of *strong confidence* in the ability of the Triple Gem to guide us; turn to them. So that makes our practice quite strong at that point. And it really cuts away a lot of our pride. Pride is a big hindrance on the path.

(We'll start getting into the whole subject of refuge next time. It's quite an interesting subject, quite a long one, discussing why take refuge and how to relate to Buddha, Dharma, Sangha; what are the advantages of taking refuge and what are the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, so we would start to understand what they are and how to relate to them.)

Purify

If you remember, in the Prayer of the Benefits of Nyung Nay, it was talking about:

- if one experiences heat or cold or fatigue, it purifies the cause to be reborn in the hell realm;
- if one experiences hunger and thirst, it purifies the hungry ghost karma;
- if the mind is really bewildered and difficult to concentrate during Nyung Nay, that's animal karma.

You can again see the relationship between the kind of rebirth and the present mental state, and you can begin to understand how purification practice works. Because, sometimes when you do a heavy purification practice like this, some karma that would have manifested in the environment and in our body for a long, long period of time, due to the power of the practice and our sincere motivation, manifest in a similar kind of mental state or physical experience, but it lasts a few hours or one day. You can really see the benefit of doing intense practices like Nyung Nay because even though one may experience some hunger or thirst, or it's difficult to concentrate or one gets very tired, it's really the burning up of so much karma. People who did Nyung Nay really have a big cause to rejoice.

And it's also helpful to think, actually, whenever we experience any kind of difficulties, instead of getting stuck in whatever our difficulty is -- "Poor me, poor me! Why is this happening?" -- to think this is a result of my negative karma and by the power of my practice and my thinking like this, this could be the ripening of karma, that if it hadn't ripen like this, it would have ripen over 15 million eons in the hell realm. So it is very good that it is coming out now. And if we think like that, then it really helps us get through painful situations.

Try and think over what you heard, draw some conclusions, think about the main points, so that you have something to take with you and you have something you can use in your daily life. So meditate for about 5 minutes.

Footnote

1. "Pollyanna" means an irrepressible optimist; named after the heroine of a novel.
2. More details on the lower realms could be found in most Lam Rim texts, eg. *An Anthology of Well-Spoken Advice* by Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey.