

The Three Types of Spiritual Beings

An Interview with GESHE SOPA RINPOCHE

by JAMES BLUMENTHAL

JAMES BLUMENTHAL: *Geshe-la, would you please explain the three types of beings as described in Atisha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment?*

GESHE SOPA: Every being in the world is looking for some kind of peace or happiness, and trying to solve their problems and avoid undesirable things. On that basis, we are all equal.

But Buddhist teachings discuss differences between beings, mainly based on their spiritual aspirations and on the objectives or goals they are seeking. Basically, there are two types of goals. One type of goal is temporary, where one seeks a worldly good life or higher rebirth; the other is the final highest goal, called complete liberation from misery and problems.

We humans mostly spend our time pursuing temporary or worldly goals. Anybody who is seeking samsaric happiness, which is the temporary goal of happiness and peace merely in this life or after this life, is called a 'small being' in Buddhism. According to the teachings of Buddha, when one is looking not just to solve the problems of this life and to find happiness in this life, that is called spirituality.

Small beings are divided into two types, 'mere small beings,' who are concerned mainly with this life, and 'special small beings' who are pursuing samsaric goals, but for future lives. For that reason, according to Buddhism, the special small being is considered to be pursuing a spiritual life. Buddhist teachings offer special methods based on the goals of those beings who seek a spiritual life.

The mere small being is not special, and can include everyone, even beings in lower realms. Most small beings are mainly interested in the pleasures and happiness of this life—that is, they are interested mainly in a samsaric type of life and mainly seek higher rebirths. But the small beings who are called special do not think only of this life. Instead, they have started learning a little

about what comes after this life, and know that there are higher lives that are the result of wholesome virtuous actions, and much lower lives that are the result of bad actions or karma.

In his summary of Buddhist teachings, *Lamp on the Path to Enlightenment*, Lama Atisha divides everyone into three types of beings. When Atisha talks about beginners, he says that the first type or first scope of being includes both of these, the special small and the mere small. He says:

Seeking only samsaric pleasures by any method whatsoever, striving after their own goals, that is known as the smallest.

This means that if one is just interested in merely the pleasure of this life, not seeking any goals beyond that, or not even believing in future lives, among the beings, that is the smallest. However, special small beings are interested in learning about future lives, and are concerned about falling into a miserable life after this one. There-

- it is important especially
- for us who are following
- Buddhism and following
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- these scopes, to know
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- what one must avoid in
- order to accomplish the
- goals of each scope.

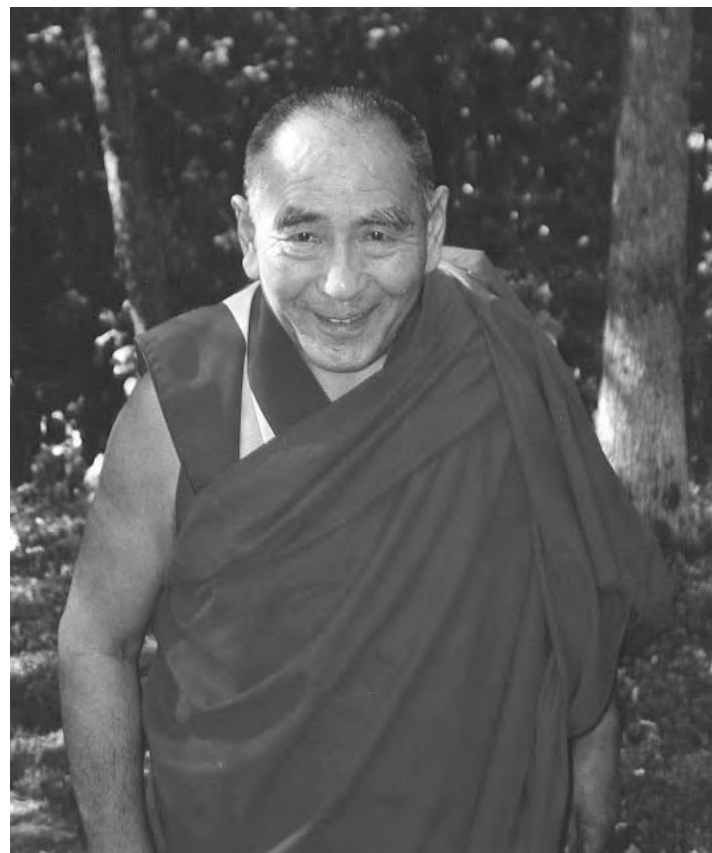
fore they seek freedom from that, and strive for a higher rebirth as a human or deva. The special small being worries about future lives in accordance with the spiritual teachings that explain that as a result of evil negative karma, one will be born in three lower realms, called hell, preta and animal. These are all lives in which one experiences only misery and suffering all the time.

The special type of being is one who is interested in learning what will happen to them after this life. If one is born in these kinds of realms,

what kind of misery and problems will one face? If one is born in a good rebirth, as a god or human, as explained in the teachings, what will one experience? Then, based on learning what one may experience in future lives, one tries to analyze to see what the causes of those experiences are. Understanding that, the special being will try to develop positive causes as much as possible in this life, and to get rid of negative causes. Even though these second beings, the 'special small' beings, are not seeking emancipation or Buddhahood, but merely a future life after this life in which they are born in a higher rebirth and are free from lower life and its miseries, according to Buddhism, that is the beginning of the first type of spiritual being.

A person who is mainly involved in methods that are wholesome and virtuous actions that stop evil karma and produce positive future lives is a 'special' small being. In general, this special level of small beings can develop higher spiritually, looking beyond just the samsaric happiness of this or future lives, and seeing that samsaric pleasures are not the final goal, not the solution. They can begin to seek to be completely free from all types of problems, including those of gods, humans and, of course, lower beings. Each of these types of existence has different kinds of suffering, and freedom from those sufferings can be achieved by completely removing their causes.

These causes are explained in detail as karma and its cause, the delusions. Basically the delusions are the three mental poisons—attachment, anger and ignorance—and the many other types of mental afflictions. Those are the causes that create evil or impure actions and are the main cause of samsara. One who wishes to remove those things, to completely liberate one's own mind and personality from them, will first ask whether that is possible. Then, if it is, they will ask by which method they can completely cease karma and delusions. They will want to learn those methods, and



Geshe Sopa Rinpoche

then by applying them, will mainly seek their own complete emancipation from impure life, whether lower lives in hells or higher lives up to the devas. If a life is created by karma and delusion, then it's impure. But when one seeks a life beyond that for oneself, not tied to this karmic situation, then one is called an intermediate being. Total freedom from suffering for oneself, or emancipation, is the intermediate being's goal. That requires a lot of studying, meditating and practicing the methods to solve all the problems of this existence and to remove their causes.

Knowing what causes bring about what results is one of the most important teachings. When Buddha taught the four noble truths, the first truth, the truth of suffering, showed the different types of suffering in detail. Then the second truth, the truth of the cause of suffering, is explained as karma, and karma itself is caused by various mental delusions, mainly ignorance. If these causes of suffering can be eliminated, then of course their result can be eliminated. But if the causes cannot be eliminated, then there is no way to seek cessation.

Buddha taught the truth of suffering and the cause of suffering, showing what kinds of sufferings beings experience, from those of hell all the way up to those of the deva realms, and showing that this suffering cannot happen without a cause. This cause is not purely outside; the main cause is within each individual: mental afflictions which are mainly prime ignorance, or egotistic view, and then attachment to one's own side and hatred towards

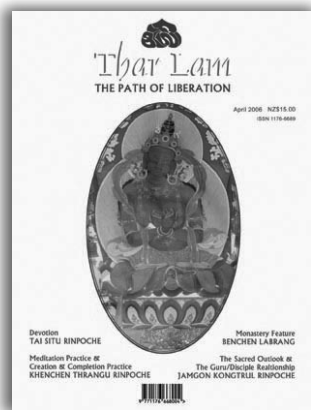
others. These are the three mental poisons, which are the key causes of suffering; and from those three root delusions many branches are described, such as jealousy, pride and all kinds of other delusions. One needs to know that each of these delusions is removable, and one needs to know by which antidote they are removed temporarily and by which they are completely uprooted. Some antidotes reduce or subdue delusions, and some remove them completely.

Thus there are two different levels of practices or methods taught in detail in Buddhist teachings. If one is mainly seeking not samsaric pleasure—impure life in this life or in future lives—but instead is seeking complete emancipation, and based on this, one is mainly engaged in studying, learning and implementing those practices for those purposes, then one has become an intermediate being. Buddha taught the path extensively, but Atisha taught it in a summarized way. Lama Atisha in his short *Lamp on the Path* explains intermediate beings as:

Those who turn their back on the pleasures of existence
And turn away from evil actions
To strive only for their own peace:
These beings are called intermediate.

This verse refers to those who work their whole life striving mainly for peace for themselves, and who reverse their own mind from any kind of pleasure of samsara—that means impure pleasure, sensual pleasure, high rebirth and

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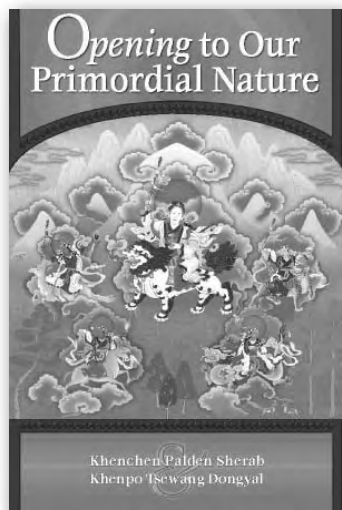
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KHENCHEN PALDEN SHERAB RINPOCHE and KHENPO TSEWANG DONGYAL RINPOCHE are founders and directors of Padmasambhava Buddhist Center, based at Padma Samye Ling in upstate New York. PBC includes over twenty local centers in the United States, Puerto Rico and Russia, as well as retreat centers and monastic institutions in the United States and India.



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—BUDDHADHARMA

THE THREE TYPES OF SPIRITUAL BEINGS

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so on. Because one's mind has been turned away from samsaric pleasures, one tries to turn away also from evil karma. Such a person, who is merely seeking perfect or everlasting peace for their self, is called an intermediate being.

In many Buddhist teachings, one may hear of the 'Hinayana' and 'Mahayana' systems. 'Hinayana' practitioners are of this intermediate type, mainly seeking their own goal of complete emancipation without too much emphasis on others. The term 'Hinayana' in Sanskrit means lesser or lower vehicle. Usually small vehicles carry a small load, and big vehicles can carry huge loads. In the same way here, the mental attitude of practitioners of the Hinayana vehicle is to take responsibility for one's own goal; on that basis, the scope is smaller because one is looking for one's own individual way. One whose personality is mainly involved in the path in this way is called a follower of the small vehicle.

This is a great thing when one has developed even that much, to the point of clearly seeing one's short life as not being for the purpose of samsaric sensual pleasure, but rather for the goal of the much better and longer lasting peace, and then working mainly towards that. It's difficult to fit into this category of being. Ordinary beings are usually below that because this is a special kind of mental scope.

The third level of beings are the great beings of the Mahayana.

These are people who have first trained in the proper knowledge and later even seek their own emancipation for a little while. But then their concern finally turns towards others, starting with their own dear mother and from there, to everybody in the world. Since everybody is looking for happiness and pleasure, in that sense everybody is the same. Knowing this, one's attitude changes. One sees that looking after merely one's own small area is not enough. Instead it is much greater to fulfill everybody's wishes. One sees so much misery and suffering worldwide, everywhere, from hells all the way to impure lives in the higher realms, and one wants to free them all. Great beings have so much desire to take responsibility for all beings. They develop first love and compassion for all beings, and when they have a strong wish to act on that, they then determine how to become most beneficial for others. At that time, one sees that the only perfect way, without error or discrimination, is when oneself achieves highest Enlightenment, where all obscurations have been removed and omniscience has been obtained. Until one reaches that state, one will try to help others, but it won't be perfect. Once that state is attained, one will be of perfect help and benefit to others. Therefore, one mainly seeks that highest goal, called perfect Enlightenment. When a person's attitude changes towards fulfilling the purposes of others, and that attitude arises spontaneously, from then on, one fits into the category of great beings.

From the point of view of these three scopes, one can see that being interested in the sensual pleasures of this life and not believing or seeking anything else, from a spiritual point of view, is the worst. It has no spiritual value. This is the scope of the mere small being. If one is looking for methods to bring about this kind of pleasure and enjoyment, not only for this but also for future lives, then one fits into the category of spiritual beings, which begins with special small beings.

From there, there are three goals. One is to be free in future lives from the worst miseries of lower lives and to attain a higher life, thinking that even if the happiness they seek is samsaric, it doesn't matter; they still consider it worth pursuing. With just the goal of fighting not to be reborn in a lower situation as a result of negative karma one begins the spiritual scope. As explained, for the intermediate scope being, temporarily being free from lower beings' miseries is not enough. Achieving higher birth is not enough. Realizing that any kind of samsaric life is impure and in the nature of suffering, and then wanting complete emancipation from that for oneself, is the intermediate scope. Then, wanting complete freedom not only for oneself but for others too, and mainly seeking to accomplish that, makes one a being of great scope.

There are three different levels or scopes, and it is important especially for us who are following Buddhism and following the teachings based on these scopes, to know what is needed and what one must avoid in order to accomplish the goals of each scope. On each level, it is important to know how to accomplish one's spiritual goals, and to then engage mainly in doing that. Within the third scope too, when achieving those goals for oneself is not important and one is concerned mainly for others, one needs to know what one has to do mentally to bring that about. One needs to know what kind of action, what methods and what path should be taken.

For us who are interested in Buddhism, we have to first thoroughly

learn and study these areas. Otherwise, blind faith will not bring us to those goals. Therefore, first try to study and understand. First you have to understand mentally, and then examine and analyze. Finally when those things come into one's own mind clearly, you have to put them into practice; this is what we call 'meditation'.

According to Buddhism, it is important to first study one's own mind, and then to put the teachings into practice, over and over again. This is meditation. These spiritual goals will not be obtained merely by hearing. By merely thinking about them, they will not come about. Great effort at hearing, thinking and meditation is required over a long period of time. Nowadays there are so many intelligent people who are interested in investigating and doing all these things. When we fit into any of those scopes, we should rejoice that we are seeking this, rather than living an empty life pursuing the sensual pleasures of a full stomach and a comfortable living place. Even animals can attain these temporary goals. But we have a human life, and not just any human life, but one which offers the opportunity to hear all the teachings that are available in the world. Especially having a life where teachings and teachers are widely available, and also where one is in that place and is involved in that—that's wonderful. It is most rare, so one should have an appreciation for one's own life and rejoice, and direct one's short life towards that.

I think that is the purpose of achieving a human life. Here I am basically talking in connection with the teachings of Buddha, since I myself am a Buddhist person. But we are very fortunate that we have so many choices of special teachings, religious teachers, and various kinds of groups in different places. Having this is itself a sign of richness. According to Buddhism, if one is born as an animal, during that life one cannot fit anywhere among these three scopes. Although the teachings and teachers are available in this world, for animals, nothing is available. So this is one of the ways one should be rejoicing.

JB: Thank you for these wonderful teachings.

GESHE SOPA is recognized around the world as one of the greatest living masters of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He is the abbot and one of several resident teachers at Deer Park Buddhist Center and Monastery which he founded in 1979 in Oregon, Wisconsin, just ten minutes outside of Madison. He is now an Emeritus Professor at the University of Wisconsin where he taught in the Buddhist Studies program for thirty years. Before coming to the United States on the request of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1962, Geshe Sopa was already famous in Tibet and considered to be one of the nation's greatest scholars. As such, in 1959, when His Holiness was ready to defend his Geshe degree, Geshe Sopa-la was asked to be one of His Holiness' debate partners at His final defense to examine His Holiness' knowledge of Buddhist philosophy. Geshe-la has thousands of students around the world including many of the greatest Tibetan masters such as Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Khensur Lob-sang Tenzin Rinpoche, and Khensur Donyo Rinpoche as well as top Western scholars such as Jeffrey Hopkins, José Cabezon, and John Makransky among others. Jeffrey Hopkins referred to Geshe Sopa-la as "one of the world's great hearts and minds," and Lama Zopa Rinpoche described him as, "an incomparable example of a Dharma teacher."

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