

# Spiritual Practice

## ***A Comprehensive Spiritual Path***

### **1. The Spiritual Path – From Beginning to End**

- a. We need to build a complete and systematic course of personal spiritual development and integrate it into daily life.
- b. The Buddhist model of the “steps on the path to Awakening” (*lam rim*) presents all the stages of a comprehensive spiritual practice – from the beginning phases to full Enlightenment.
- c. The following is an outline of the three stages.

### **The Lamrim – An Abbreviated Outline**

A commonly used outline for *lamrim* teachings today is in the English translation from Tibetan of *Liberation in the Palm of your Hand* by Pabongka Rinpoche.

An abbreviated and annotated outline follows to show the structure of this *lamrim*.

- Greatness of the author of the *lamrim*, to establish the authenticity of the teaching
- Greatness of the *lamrim* itself, to gain respect for it
- How the instructions are to be received and given
- How the students are to be guided through the subjects
  1. How to rely on a spiritual guide
  2. How to train your mind on the basis of the correct way to rely on the spiritual guide

### **The path shared with persons who have a modest scope motivation** (*striving for a rebirth in the upper realms*)

- Reality that this life will end and that you will die
- Suffering in a rebirth in the lower realms (*a rebirth as a hell being, a hungry ghost or an animal, which you want to avoid*)
- (*so you take*) Refuge in the three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha
- (*and adjust your behaviour of body, speech and mind according to the*) law of cause and effect, that is karma

This will lead you to a favourable rebirth within cyclic existence in the human realm, demigod realm, or god realm.

**The path shared with persons who have a medium scope motivation** (*striving for liberation from cyclic existence*)

- Truth of suffering (*in cyclic existence in general, including the favourable rebirths*)
- Truth of the causes of suffering (*the afflictive emotions, especially ignorance*)
- The truth of cessation (*there is a state that is free of suffering and its origins*)
- The truth of a path (*the way to attain this state free of suffering and its causes by practising ethics, concentration, and wisdom*)
- Presentation of the 12 links of dependent arising

The training in the medium scope path will lead to the development of the wish to be liberated from all un-free rebirths in cyclic existence through the power of afflictive emotions.

**The path of persons who have a high scope motivation** (*striving for complete buddhahood*)

- Advantages of the mind of enlightenment (*the wish to become a buddha for the welfare of all sentient beings*)
- The way to develop the mind of enlightenment
- The 7-point instruction in seeing all sentient beings as your mothers (*from previous lives and contemplating their kindness towards you*)
- Instruction on how to exchange your self-interest for others' interest (*by looking at the drawbacks of self-cherishing and the advantages of cherishing others*)
- The way to train your mind after developing the mind of enlightenment
- Training in the six perfections of: generosity, ethics, patience, joyful effort, concentration, and wisdom

Source: Taken and adapted from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamrim>

**Resource:**

- Atisha's *Lamp for the Path to Awakening (Bodhipathapradipah)*.

## **2. Liberation in this Very Lifetime**

- a. It is rare, in the classics of Eastern spirituality, to get a detailed description of exactly what the liberated person would look like, how they would think, and what they would do.
- b. However, just such an extended depiction of the *jivanmukta*, a person “liberated in this very lifetime,” is presented in the *Ashtavakra Gita*. It shows how we can act like such a person as we proceed toward the fulfillment of our own spiritual path.
- c. In other words, the *Ashtavakra Gita* gives a detailed portrait of the liberated person, which can then function as paragon we can model in our own lives.
- d. We need to catch ourselves in the ways we identify with a suffering self rather than with our True Self.
- e. We can acquire the ultimate in “self-esteem” through wisdom about the nature of the True Self and Ultimate Reality.

### **Resource:**

- Selections from the *Ashtavakra Gita*.

## **3. Meditation: Establish Personal Calm-Abiding in a Hectic World.**

- a. We need to practice both calm-abiding mediation and insight meditation.
- b. Stress and busyness are enemies of a calm and relaxed mind – that both spiritual practice, and happiness in general, require.
- c. We can create more peace in life even while engaged in fulfilling responsibilities towards friends, family, and community.
- d. It is possible to remain active without stress – getting organized; keeping priorities straight; doing what needs to be done; knowing when to act and when to relax; recognizing mindful action and mindful non-action; acting without expectation; and, living a retreat lifestyle.
- e. In sum, we need to remember to prioritize beneficial activity, avoid procrastination, and turn problems into opportunities – as well as keep the mind undistracted, even in difficult circumstances.

**Resources:**

- *Bhagavad Gita*
- *Ashtavakra Gita*
- *Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*
- *Patanjali's Yoga Sutra*
- *Svatmarama's Hatha Yoga Pradipika*

**4. Mindfulness: Live Fully and Happily in the Present**

- a. We need to create a mindful lifestyle – and to avoid activities detrimental to mindfulness.
- b. Additionally, we should cultivate methods for mental awareness and successful meditation.

**Resources:**

- The Buddha's *Mahsatipatthana Sutta*
- Kamalashila's *Bhavana Krama*
- *Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*
- *Svatmarama's Hatha Yoga Pradipika*

***Practice of Yoga*****1. Overview of the Spectrum of Yoga**

- a. The complete and systematic practice of yoga includes far more than physical poses.
- b. We need to understand the spectrum of yoga with all its practices and philosophy according to the classic texts of the Indian yogic tradition – that is, the meaning, purpose, and method of yoga.
- c. Three important yogas are:
  - The Yoga of Ethical Self-Discipline and Karma
  - The Yoga of the Heart
  - The Yoga of Wisdom

**Resources:**

- Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*
- Svamarama's *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*
- *Bhagavad Gita*
- *Narada Bhakti Sutra*.

**2. The Yoga of Action**

- a. The first of the three yogas of the *Bhagavad Gita* described here, *karma yoga*, provides the key to freedom not through renunciation of the world but rather while still actively engaged in the world.
- b. While we may now be imprisoned in the world of *karma*, the yoga of action is a practice for conducting ourselves in such a way that liberation is possible without giving up worldly activity and relationships.
- c. We need to recognize the "laws of karma" and how they work and to implement our practice of "karma yoga" in service to others

**Resource:**

- Based on selections from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

**3. The Yoga of Devotion**

- a. The yoga of devotion (*bhakti yoga*) is in many ways the culmination of the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*.
- b. Devoting ourselves to someone or something other and higher than ourselves – "Krishna," "God," "all sentient beings," "the cosmos," etc. – requires the discipline of surrendering the command of the individual ego and all its many demands.
- c. We need to realize the harmful character of a purely secular, non-spiritual life – and oppose pure egoism with "sacrificial action" dedicated to something greater than selfish desire.
- d. We can experience with Arjuna the mind-blowing epiphany in the famous Eleventh Chapter of the *Gita* and learn how such profound mystical experiences can be not only life-changing but also integrated into everyday life.

**Resource:**

- Based on selections from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

#### **4. The Yoga of Wisdom**

- a. In this, the last of the three yogas of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the crucial concept of “wisdom” common to all forms of Eastern spirituality is investigated – what is “wisdom,” and why does it have the life-changing power to liberate us?
- b. We need to understand what is meant in Eastern traditions by “ignorance” and identify its workings in our own life.
- c. Finally, we need to comprehend how wisdom leads naturally to true compassion for all beings and changes our relationship to them.

#### **Resource:**

- Based on selections from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

### ***Four Truths***

#### **1. The Workings of Karma and Causation**

- a. Why do things happen the way they do? And even more importantly, why do things – “good” or “bad” – happen *to me*?
- b. There are three important chapters from Nagarjuna’s philosophical powerhouse (*Root Verses of the Middle Way*; chapters 1, 8, and 17) that address these fundamental and age-old questions.
- c. Teachings on cause and effect, and the so-called “laws of karma”, are crucial to most traditions of Eastern spirituality, and Nagarjuna offers some deep and surprising insights concerning the necessity of detaching from grasping to doctrines and dogmas as we move toward Awakening.
- d. Concepts include: The different kinds of causes and conditions; causality and interdependence; nothing starts and nothing stops; the emptiness of actors and actions; an analysis of how karma works; the problem of continuity between action and its result; karma and rebirth; and, karma works, but not how we think it does.
- e. We can come to understand the simple, logical keys for deciphering the philosophical arguments for emptiness and interdependence put forward by Nagarjuna, often called the “Second Buddha”.
- f. We need to gain a deep understanding of the nature of cause and effect and practical methods for using such an understanding in daily life.

- g. We can explore the apparent difference – and then come to realize the true inseparability – of the actor and the roles he or she plays in life.
- h. May we obtain profound insights into the nature of karma, moral responsibility, and the unfailing but incomprehensible relationship between karmic causes and the consequences of action.

**Resource:**

- Based on Chapters One, Eight, and Seventeen of Nagarjuna's *Root Verses of the Middle Way (Mulamadhyamaka Karika)*

## **2. The Four Noble Truths: Problem, Cause, Goal, and Solution**

- a. The "Four Noble Truths," which encapsulate the Buddha's teaching, outline a universally applicable structure for any form of spiritual practice:
  - Identify the problem of suffering;
  - Analyze the cause of the problem;
  - Recognize an alternative to suffering; and
  - Provide a method for realizing freedom from suffering and achieving perfect peace.
- b. We need to establish a firm foundation for a spiritual practice that leads to freedom from suffering.
- c. We can identify areas of unhappiness and discontent in our life and learn how to transform them.
- d. May we uncover the real cause of all forms of suffering and recognize that there is an alternative to perpetual dissatisfaction.
- e. We need to learn practical methods for defeating the "mental afflictions" and obtaining true peace and happiness.

**Resources:**

- Selections from the Buddha's *Turning of the Wheel of Dharma Sutra (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta)*
- Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*
- *Bhagavad Gita*
- *Ashtavakra Gita*
- *The Bible*.

### **3. The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising: Bondage, Freedom, and Interconnection**

- a. Among the most profound teachings of Buddhism is the so-called “Twelve Links of Dependent Arising” – an analysis of the circular nature of the actions that keep us perpetually suffering.
- b. We need to understand the ways we repeatedly re-create the causes of our own suffering and how we can break out of this “wheel” and attain total freedom.
- c. We can discover how “dependent arising” works in our own lives to keep us suffering – and also how the causal process of rebirth works (over lifetimes, as well as moment by moment).
- d. We need to gain a deep understanding of what is meant by “interdependence” and how to live a more connected life.
- e. May we identify the “weak links” in the “chain” and how to break them – and also analyze the five principal “mental afflictions” and acquire practical strategies for combatting them.

#### **Resources:**

- Chapter 26 of Nagarjuna’s *Root Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mulamadhyamaka Karika*)
- An addendum from Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* on the five principal mental afflictions

### **4. Finding the Heart in the Heart Sutra**

- a. A vital question is: What is the true nature of reality and how can we live in harmony with it?
- b. The *Heart Sutra* is regarded as the essential core (“heart”) of the Buddha’s teachings on “emptiness” – the lack of self-nature in anything or anyone – and is admired by spiritual practitioners around the world for its deep wisdom.
- c. Buried within the text is the mapping of the five “paths” or stages that guide us into Awakening – and also included is a famous and powerful *mantra* that allude to these five paths.
- d. Concepts include: Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form; the emptiness of the self and all its parts; the emptiness of Buddhist teachings; and the five paths of the spiritual journey.



- e. We need to identify the “big questions” in life: What is the meaning of it all? Why am I here? How should I live?
- f. Also, we need to discover what is really meant by “emptiness” and how to live in relation to it – as well as to specifically analyze the emptiness of the self and why this matters in practical terms.
- g. Finally, we should learn what it means to say “suffering is empty” and how this provides the key to true happiness.

**Resource:**

- Based on the *Heart Sutra (Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra)*

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**Source:** “A Spiritual Path” is based on, to a large degree, the following reference: The curriculum outline for “Classical Texts and Authentic Practices of Eastern Spirituality” by Lama Marut (aka Brian Smith), 2019.

The “Classical Texts and Authentic Practices of Eastern Spirituality” curriculum offers a progressively unfolding, comprehensive course of study in the wisdom and practical application of Eastern spirituality as it pertains to modern life.

Based on Lama Marut’s original translations and relevant, applicable interpretations of the Sanskrit classics of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Yogic traditions, twelve courses cover a wide range of teachings and practices from an inclusive, comparative, and non-sectarian point of view.

They are designed to provide an in-depth, systematic, and coherent foundation and overall framework for any serious spiritual practitioner — from beginners to experienced teachers, regardless of one’s religious affiliation or the lack thereof.

For course details, see the following website.

<https://mindooasis.org/classes/classical-texts-and-authentic-practices-of-eastern-spirituality/>

Note: Lama Marut (1953–2019); spiritual teacher, husband, father and friend.