

***Gates to Buddhist Practice***

Chagdud Tulku

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At first glance, Tibetan Buddhism can appear dauntingly complex, as labyrinthine in its conceptual schemes as it is Byzantine in its cultural expressions. This complexity has much to do with the diversity that had developed within Indian Buddhism by the time of its assimilation in Tibet (circa 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E). The early Tibetan scholars were faced with the difficult task of reconciling in their practical path summaries the historically and doctrinally divergent *Hīnayāna*, *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* traditions and showing the continuity between them. This continuity only becomes evident when we internalize (*nyams su len*) the teachings, taking them to heart as personal instructions. According to Buddhist tradition, Buddhist teachings (*chos*) comprise both textual transmission (*lung*)—the path as codified by tradition—and realization (*rtogs*)—the path as lived individually. From this perspective, the myriad Buddhist teachings (tradition enumerates as many as 84,000 methods corresponding to the same number of emotional afflictions present in human beings) are distilled into a single path when selectively applied to one's particular life-situation.

*Gates of Buddhist Practice*, a sequentially arranged collection of oral teachings by the late Chagdud Tulku, presents the distilled quintessence of Tibetan Buddhism. The key points of *Hīnayāna*, *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna*, as well as the distinctively Tibetan *Dzogchen* tradition, are presented in the author's uniquely simple and direct style and enlivened throughout by stories and anecdotes from his life and tradition. Yet the simplicity of his teachings belies a tremendous depth and breadth of knowledge gained from an extraordinary lifetime of study, practice and teaching. This combination of simplicity and profundity makes the book a rare treasure, valuable to new and experienced readers alike. It is a book that merits serious reading and diligent application. As the Preface (p. ix) states: "The depth of these teachings will become increasingly apparent upon repeated readings, but more so through the application of the principles taught."

The first of the book's five parts confronts the primary emotional afflictions—desire, hatred and delusion—that perpetuate the cycle of egocentric deliberations and their consequences and keep us imprisoned in fictitious worlds of our own making. The remaining four parts follow the characteristic structure of the Nyingma *Lam rim* ("Stages of the Path") genre, complementing the detailed treatment of the relevant

subject matter found in scholastic path summaries such as Klong chen pa's *Sems nyid ngal gso*, 'Jigs med gling pa's *Yon tan mdzod* (with their commentaries) and Dpal sprul rin po che's *Kun bzang bla ma zhal lung*. Chagdud Tulku elucidates Buddhist topics and principles in light of their ongoing relevance to the human condition, repeatedly emphasizing the need to apply the teachings in order to derive their benefit. The entire gradation of the path from the four preliminary topics—uniqueness of human existence, impermanence, karma and suffering—to the direct realization of one's natural condition by way of *Vajrayāna* and Dzogchen teachings, is condensed into a series of practical instructions that elucidate the essence and purpose of each stage of the journey. The book gives particularly detailed attention to the so-called preliminaries, repeatedly clarifying their foundational character and relevance to all stages of the path. As Chagdud Tulku states (p. 45):

Many people believe these teachings are for beginners. They want to hurry on to something "profound," beyond what they think of as "kindergarten dharma." But the contemplation of the four thoughts is among the most profound and beneficial practices on the path to enlightenment. For these are the foundational truths that underlie the entire spiritual path.

As a lucid and accessible introduction to the essence of Tibetan Buddhism, *Gates of Buddhist Practice* belongs to the small number of Buddhist classics for westerners such as *Zen Mind*, *Beginner's Mind* and *What the Buddha Taught* that reveal the essence and applicability of the teachings in a straightforward, non-academic style. The kaleidoscopic diversity of Tibetan Buddhism can easily distract one from the simplicity that lies at its heart. It is the great merit of *Gates of Buddhist Practice* to remind one that the quintessence of the Buddhist path lies in its earnest application.

David Higgins  
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