**The Preciousness and Rarity of Human Life**
***by Dhammadinna***

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**What does it mean to be human? Our choices and possibilities; the balance of karma and karma vipaka, pleasure and pain**

Yesterday we looked at the four mind turnings collectively, and today we're going to start looking at each one individually, starting with the precious human birth. Yesterday I said I thought this was a good place to start, because it's such a positive take on human life, human birth, human body. I said the reflections hopefully would lead us to appreciation, gratitude, self confidence, faith and motivation to practise, and I get the impression from many, many retreats that we Westerners often find it quite hard to value our life and our experience. We're quite conflicted sometimes. We've all sorts of conditionings which affect the way we look at our lives and at ourselves. Hopefully this very positive take might help us to begin to overcome that if we suffer from self doubt, etc.

You could say this talk was subtitled, '*What does it mean to be Human?*' I'm going to explore it from a traditional Buddhist point of view; what a traditional Buddhist point of view thinks it means to be born a human being, but I think it would be quite interesting for us to look at that and think whether we think that is what a human being is, or a human life is. We have a human consciousness obviously, but we come from very different cultural contexts and so on from when these teachings were developed.

It's not just what it means to be a human being in a human body. The 'precious human birth' is a translation of a term in Tibetan which is used not just for someone with a human form, but for someone with a human form or birth with the eight freedoms, the ten endowments, and the three kinds of faith. So it's a very highly endowed human existence. It's the human form, the eight freedoms, the ten endowments, and the three kinds of faith that we're going to explore today. They are listed on the accompanying sheet, and comprise the traditional take on the precious human birth.

We're also going to look (and this is traditional) at the human birth, the human realm in comparison with beings in other realms. Implicit – and I'm making it more explicit in this – are the six realms of the wheel of life. We're looking at a particular realm, the human realm. The other realms of course are the long-lived gods, the asuras, and then the lower realms of the hungry ghosts, the hell beings and the animals.

Within the six realms the human beings or the human realm is not unique. It's just one manifestation of a kind of flow of psychophysical energy. Buddhism says that consciousness is what is most important, consciousness or mind. That is what precedes and determines being. Life-streams of psychophysical energy carrying karma and karmavipāka determine your realm and your body, your birth and your experience. The human realm is just one realm in the cycle of the six realms. The universe from a traditional Buddhist point of view teems with consciousness. I think it's worth making the point when we're looking at what a human being is that, because we're looking at this kind of model – whether we look at it cosmologically or psychologically, the six realms – Buddhism does not think that the human being is different in kind from other life forms. This is different from the Judeo-Christian tradition, which holds that because human beings have a soul there is a difference in kind between us and other life forms. I don't know if people still think that.

So this model is that a human being is different in degree rather than in kind. It's one manifestation of consciousness which comes into being in dependence upon karma. In the six realm model all beings have Buddha nature; all beings have the potential for Enlightenment. The Jewel Ornament of Liberation starts by saying this and then says the most conducive state of birth from which to realize Enlightenment is the precious human body, with its freedoms, endowments and its faith.

> *The human body is like a precious vase, capable of containing the elixir of immortality*.

That is a general point about the human body in relationship with the six realms. We're going to come and look at the six realms in a bit more depth in the talk on saṁsāra.

Traditionally – and I think this is true of our human existence – the human realm has distinctive features in comparison with the beings in the other realms. I think the main thing we have as human beings is self-reflexive awareness: the ability to choose and therefore change. That's considered rare and priceless, one of the privileges of human life, hard won, and it comes with responsibilities to choose well, and possibilities for Enlightenment.

We can choose and change. We can affect our experience and channel our mind stream along more and more skilful channels. Choice and karma are equivalent: choice, karma, intention, motivation, volition, direction. We modify our karma and karma-vipāka through choice. The distinctive feature of the human realm compared with the other realms is that we have that ability. We have a balance of karma and karma-vipāka, so in the gap we can choose a new direction, we can change a habit, we can get off the wheel to some extent and onto the spiral. We have that ability: to create fresh karma-vipāka.

If we look at the other realms in comparison, they are realms purely of karma-vipāka. In the lower realms, the animals, the hell realms and the hungry ghosts are reaping the

fruits of previous unskilful actions and they're painful realms. I think you can include the asuras in that. They're not always mentioned – they're sometimes left out. The god realm is purely pleasurable. They are reaping the consequences of previous skilful actions.

There's a balance of karma and karma-vipāka in the human realm, and a balance of pleasure and pain, and the other realms are imbalanced in both those ways. The way you get out of one of the other realms, is that either your karma exhausts itself (and no-one is in any realm for ever – it's not that fatalistic), and other karmas come into fruition, which may take you into another birth, perhaps a better one, or you need outside help. That's why you have the Buddha or Avalokiteśvara appearing in the six realms and offering the help those beings in that realm need.

You can create fresh karma in those other realms, but unfortunately it's usually along the line that you're already going, and we know this don't we, psychologically! If you're already in a not very skilful mental state, you're more likely to do something unskilful and more likely to dig yourself in deeper! You're on a sort of downward spiral, hopefully not a path of no return, but more and more difficult to get out of.

Those are the two distinctive features of being in the human realm: we have the ability to choose and change and we have a balance of karma and karma-vipāka – we can change the direction of our lives – and we have a balance of pleasure and pain. We experience both pleasure and pain, whereas in the other realms it's either one or the other. The pain in the human realm doesn't overwhelm us. It isn't too much, but it's enough pain to make us think about saṁsāra and the nature of life. Maybe we're caught up in a pleasure-pain cycle, and we're attached to things that are pleasurable, which don't bring us lasting happiness. If so, the amount of discontent that we experience can motivate us to practise.

There's also pleasure, so we can enjoy things. That can open us up to the unconditioned and so we respond to beauty, nature, friendship, people and eventually to the transcendental. We've got that balance in the truly human realm.

I think the small amount of pain or misery also works against the human poison which is pride. If we go into a god realm for a bit, and get too 'up ourselves' that we're having a great time, sooner or later it'll end and that pride will be transformed to some extent.

**The human realm is central to the six realms of the Wheel of Life**

You could see the model of the six realms differently, and put the human realm in the centre. This is something Bhante talks about in *The Human Condition*, in *The Three Jewels* which you were asked to read. He goes a little bit further in his seminar commenting on that chapter. If you imagine the five realms with the human realm in the

centre, he says it's the central realm, it's axial. Not only is it central in this new model, it's also slightly raised up, because that balance of pleasure and pain and of karma and karma-vipāka give us a perspective on our experience, whereas if you're in one of the other realms either psychologically or cosmologically you don't have a perspective. You've lost your perspective on your experience.

I think that's very, very interesting. It's one of the marks of human existence, that we have a perspective on our experience, a total all-round view, and that can lead to equanimity. What he says is that that perspective from a human point of view is the beginning or the precursor of wisdom, of total panoramic awareness. For example, if we're in a reasonably good mental state, we may have mental states that are more associated with a hungry ghost realm – we may have an extremely neurotic craving for a chocolate biscuit or whatever! - or we may be unhappy, and we may have mental states that pertain to those other states, but if we don't identify with those mental states, we won't go and live in that realm. If we can keep a perspective, the mental states come and go, and we stay aware of those mental states, we'll stay in the human realm. That's what we're trying to do in any awareness practice and in meditation. All kinds of mental states come and go, and we're trying to see them for what they are. We see them come and go, and we maintain a perspective. So that's a quality of the human realm which the other realms lack.

If we can maintain a perspective on our experience, we won't illegitimately generalise from our present experience. It's that tendency that takes us off into another psychological realm. In the seminar on this, Bhante uses a couple of very mundane examples. He says, say you've got toothache; duḥkha duḥkha. You've got pain, and that pain can be quite overwhelming, toothache. So you could just sit with the pain, but what we do so quickly is that we load on top of that all kinds of mental attitudes. We 'always' and 'never'. We never should 'never'! We never should 'always'! We think things like, "*I always get toothache before I go on holiday... it always happens to me... it's completely ruined my life*..." You've made it into a whole thing. You get very angry, for example. You've over identified and over generalised from this present experience. That is going to take you into a more and more painful mental state.

The other example he uses which is quite funny is that you have to write something and you break the lead in your pencil. Maybe that's a bit more everyday. Maybe it's at your computer, and your lovely new computer doesn't work. Instead of thinking, "Oh dear, the technology's not quite up to it," you go into a completely frenetic, hysterical, frenetic mental state which carries you off into another realm.

It's interesting to reflect on that quality of human existence, that we have those balances of karma and karma-vipāka, and pleasure and pain. That gives us a sense of perspective on our mental states, and that 's a precursor to wisdom. He says that on this axis, where the human realm is in the centre, you're on an axis to Buddhahood. '*Outside living beings, no Buddhas. This very body the Buddha*.'

**Human birth is not accidental but due to past skilful karma; affinity between ourselves and Enlightenment**

That's a general look at some of the qualities of a precious human birth. Traditionally it's also said that we don't have a precious human birth just by chance. In exploring this mind turning and the other mind turnings we are looking at experience within a perspective, not just of karma and karma-vipāka, but also of karma and rebirth. I don't know if you believe in the cycle of karma and rebirth, but maybe for the present try to take it provisionally. This is one of the frameworks we're looking at, and we'll explore it in more depth later. Traditionally we have a model of different realms in which we're born. We are not just born in the human realm out of chance, we are born there because of previous skilful actions. If we continue to practise ethically we can become more and more truly human and then enlightened.

That's interesting in terms of the nature of Buddhist ethics. Bhante makes a couple of points – I can't remember which seminar it's in – in which he is talking about both ethics and the ideal of human Enlightenment as natural. He says that in Buddhism, ethics isn't something that is imposed from the outside artificially, it's something which is implicit in our self-reflexive awareness, in our consciousness. Ethics is a natural expression of our humanity. If we were truly human we would act in an ethical way. If we were happy, if we were aware, if we were sensitive, why would we choose to harm other beings? Surely we would choose to respect other life forms and understand that they suffer, just as we do. You can follow that through all the precepts. You can take the precepts as rules of training and guidelines, but essentially they're a natural expression of our human nature.

He goes on to say in the same way in what is sometimes called 'the ideal of Enlightenment', this precious human birth is the crucial realm or birth from which to attain Enlightenment. From that point of view again, it's as though the ideal of Enlightenment is a natural ideal.

We can do odd things with ideals. We can be naively idealistic, as we know, and we can make ideals as a sort of whip to beat ourselves with. We can alienate them from our natural experience. So he's trying to point out that although we may do that, it's not really like that. It's a natural ideal, it's not imposed from the outside. It takes the person into account. It goes back to that statement at the beginning of *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* that all beings have Buddha nature. We have the potential for Enlightenment, so the ideal of Enlightenment is to activate our potential. We can grow towards that potential; we have a natural affinity with Enlightenment. It may be from some points of view a long way away, or deep within, depending on how you look at it, but there is an affinity. If there wasn't that affinity and we didn't have Buddha nature and some sort of potential within us, we couldn't resonate with the Dharma.

So there's a very, very positive focus in traditional Buddhism on the precious human birth, on the human realm, on the precious human body. It may be surprising if you haven't come across these teachings before, because there are also other teachings in

Buddhism that say that the body is a heap of filth, for example Śāntideva, in the *Bodhicaryavaara* (however he also says the body is the elixir of immortality). I think if you've come across that and think it's horrible, it's important to try to see it in perspective. The *asubha-bhavana* methods of looking at the body and analysing it into its component parts is a method for breaking our attachment to the body in a particular way, for example if we think we need lots of pleasures for the body and that's going to make us ultimately happy. It isn't telling us that we shouldn't look after our bodies, but that we're trying to break an attachment to the body so that it doesn't lead to suffering.

These two things are usually held in balance. You have those kind of methods, but at the same time you value your body and your life as your basis for Enlightenment, because you haven't got anything else! If you haven't got a body, you can't sit and meditate. A disembodied mind doesn't seem to work that well if you think about the bardo. So we value the body as the basis for Enlightenment and treat it as precious, so the body is not to be despised, punished or treated badly in Buddhism.

In terms of the method for analysing the human body, that same method is applied to the mind as well in Buddhism. We look at our mind analytically, and see what mental states we're made up of. So it's a method to see that there isn't enduring self or soul. That is what leads us to suffering.

We're going to look at the eight freedoms, ten endowments, and the three kinds of faith which traditionally make up this precious human birth.

**The meanings of 'precious'; what can we make of our lives in this rich consumer society?**

I'll just give you some different ways in which 'precious' is glossed in some of the traditional texts, because I think it gives a very, very positive impression of these teachings. Sometimes 'precious' is glossed as lucky, auspicious, wonderful, of immense benefit, with great resources and requisites, with the potential for Buddhahood. It's a human life or a human being with time, energy, freedom, a certain amount of leisure, motivation, opportunity, ability, capacity, good circumstances, faith, energy, intelligence, confidence, diligence, wisdom. Those are things we're going to be reflecting upon, whether we have them or do not have them, and see whether we have got these freedoms and advantages.

In the modern West we do have so much going for us. I know we've got psychological stuff that undermines all that, but we do have so much going for us. I think the challenge for us in the West is to know what to do with the resources we have available to us. Can we make something of it? Can we make our life meaningful in the midst of

our rich, consumer society?

**Eight Freedoms - from the other realms; from barbarian lands; from wrong views; from impaired senses; from a place or time without a Buddha**

First of all we're going to look at the eight freedoms. This is sometimes known as a unique occasion. The precious human birth has eight freedoms, freedoms from certain conditions. Freedom from hindrances and fetters and bondage that would prevent us from realising our potential, and this is particularly concerning time and leisure. The eight freedoms and the ten endowments are in the perspective of many births. You might have one birth and it might be more or less fortunate, and you might have some of these freedoms and some of the endowments but not all of them. You might be quite healthy, you might live in quite a cultured environment, you might not have wrong views but actually you're born in an aeon without the Buddha and without the Dharma. So you have to look at these that you might have some and not others. Ideally you would have all of the eight freedoms and all of the ten endowments.

First of all it's put negatively, freedom *from*. Firstly it's freedom from being born in a hell realm, a hungry ghost realm or an animal realm. We have taken birth not in one of the lower realms. As I've said, those three realms are realms of pain. They're realms where you're just reaping your previous karma. It might just be worth reflecting that as a hell being you're reaping a karma-vipāka of hatred, being preoccupied with hatred, and it's a realm of intense pain. Even a small amount of pain affects our practice, so just think how fortunate we are not to be born in one of those realms.

We're not born in a hungry ghost realm. Psychologically at the moment we're not in a state of intense neurotic craving or addiction, with which we're totally preoccupied and identified. This is a definition of one of these realms. You might be feeling a bit angry this morning, but you're not necessarily in a hell realm! This is a realm preoccupied and obsessed with intense feelings of deprivation. Intense hunger and thirst. Just think we're not in that experience at the moment. Just think if we are affected by just a slight experience of this, how it affects our experience, and I suspect that in terms of hunger and thirst, very few of us have experienced intense hunger. I don't know, but we tend not to in our modern society. And we know that there are beings now on this planet, starving with very intense hunger. So just think how fortunate we are that we've got food coming our way.

We're not in an animal realm. This is reaping the karma of ignorance. The focus is on food, sex and sleep only. OK, so we need food, we need sleep, and maybe we need sex – we could discuss that! But it's a complete preoccupation with those things, with no perspective beyond that.

So these three lower realms are realms of intense preoccupation with different kinds of

suffering. And there's no opportunity in them to hear the Dharma, to understand or to practise it. It's very hard to get out of those realms. We're not in one of those realms, and that's one of our freedoms. We have freedom from birth in one of the lower realms. That's the first three freedoms. Maybe the asuras are included in that. It's not often explicitly mentioned. That would be a realm where you're completely obsessed with envy and jealousy. The long-lived gods are in a pleasure realm, so that removes motivation. When you're cruising, and having a really good time, it's harder to be motivated (a) towards practice and (b) you're not really that aware of other people's suffering. You can get intoxicated with your own pleasure. They are very complacent. They're not motivated to practise.

We're in a human condition. We have a balance of pain and pleasure. The first four freedoms relate to realms, and the next four are slightly different. We're free from being born in a border tribe in a barbarian land! (I think Wales used to be seen as a border tribe! I don't know if there is anyone Welsh present – they're only seen in that way by the English. The terrible English!) So that's how it's described traditionally – a border land, a barbarian land, the barbarian hordes. But I think it doesn't necessarily mean one place or a geographical place, it could be any set of external conditions culturally where it's difficult to practise the Dharma, so it could be a set of conditions where it's very difficult to develop ethical sensitivity, if there's not any kind of civilization or culture there as a basis for Dharma practice. And I don't think culture and civilization mean that you have to have a high standard of living, or a high standard of technology. We tend to think it does, but it doesn't necessarily. If we think about what that means for us in our own experience, what a border tribe or barbarian land means. There are pockets in places we live where people are going to find it much more difficult to practise even ethically before they can get to Dharma practice, just because of how that realm is, how they've been brought up and conditioned. So we may have started off in conditions like that but through good fortune, perhaps good karma, we've found ourselves able to live in what's called a central realm.

We're free from being born amongst or developing extreme wrong views that are inimical to Dharma practice. Traditionally I think extreme wrong views would mean being conditioned or surrounded by wrong views which would not think about karma or karmavipāka, or maybe not in those terms. So there isn't an understanding that actions have any kind of consequences, so it doesn't really matter what you do. There isn't any possibility of spiritual progress or human growth. We live in quite a materialist society, quite a secular society. We are surrounded by quite mixed views. It might be good to reflect on what kind of views we think do surround us in terms of ethics. Does our society support spiritual practice, and so on? In terms of views.

We may be born in a family or culture where wrong views are predominant, and therefore undercut moral effort. They may be very hard to counteract because we don't have access to anything else. There are beings born in these kind of conditions. Wrong views are closely associated with closed-mindedness. Wrong views are strongly held wrong views. We may have questions about karma and karma-vipāka, and actions having

consequences, but we're thinking it over from an open-minded point of view. Closed-mindedness and dogmatism are very strong obstacles to practice and faith. Wherever we were born we are now practising in a way in which at least we are trying to expose our wrong views, see them for what they are, and practise differently.

We're free from being born a senseless fool, which is politically rather incorrect. It's sometimes put as 'we've got sound body and mind'. We've got an adequate intellectual capacity for understanding the Dharma. If we were born without that, impaired in any way whatsoever, it would be much harder for us to come into contact with the Dharma and then to practise it. I think this also means not just mind, but body. It's sometimes put as 'with senses impaired'. I think again people in the modern West who are blind or deaf or who have some kind of sensory difficulty, have more resources available these days – there's Braille, and people can read the Dharma and have ways of getting in touch with the Dharma. We have a woman who comes here who is deaf blind who can practise the Dharma. This was probably written at a time when those resources just would not have been available. In terms of being fortunate, if we've got our complete senses and we've got a reasonable mind, it's just much easier for us to practise the Dharma.

Lastly we're free from being born in a place and also a time where there isn't a Buddha. Again this is looking traditionally in the whole cycle of aeons and rebirths. Not every aeon or every kalpa has a Buddha. You may remember if you've done the Transcendental Principle retreat and looked at all that cosmological stuff, in some aeons there is no Buddha, because a Buddha only arises when the conditions are there which are conducive. It's an example of the law of conditionality. We may be born with many of these freedoms and endowments, but not born in an aeon where there's a Buddha, so there's no access to the Dharma, so that would not help you in your path to Enlightenment. Or you could say less cosmologically that you could be born somewhere where there is religion, ethics and so on, but there isn't the Dharma. You don't have access to that.

Those are the things that ideally, having a precious human birth, we would be born free of those restrictions. We can reflect whether we are free of those restrictions, or to what extent, and how we feel about that.

**Five direct or internal endowments - a human realm in a central country with senses unimpaired, no extreme karmic burden and with faith in the Buddha**

Then they're put positively in terms of the ten endowments. Some of these overlap. These are the freedoms, the opportunities, the resources, the conducive conditions internal and external, which help us to practise.

There are five personal endowments or internal conditions that we bring with us, it says, by virtue of who we are, from our previous karma. Some of these counteract the

freedoms. We're born in the human realm, as a human being, with self-reflexive awareness, with that balance of karma and karma-vipāka, pleasure and pain, and we can distinguish between skilful and unskilful actions. We can think, how much have we developed our humanity? We have that as a basis. We're born in a central land or region, so we're not born in a borderland or amongst a barbarian horde, we're born in a land or a set of conditions where there's some degree of understanding of ethics, some degree of civilization and culture, congenial to the Dharma, where there are opportunities to learn and develop, and also learn and develop ethics, with some kind of cultural life, and even maybe some kind of spiritual life is alive. So we've got freedom, and we're not under the power of others.

We're born with sound mind and body so we're able to understand and communicate the Dharma as well. We haven't been born with, or we are not living under, an extreme karmic burden. We're said not to have committed the five heinous crimes: wounding the Buddha, killing an Arahant, murdering our mother or father, or causing a schism in the Sangha. These are said to be very heavy karmic things to do and would bring about weighty karma-vipāka. They would obviously weigh very heavily on one's consciousness and therefore affect one's rebirth. You could say we haven't committed any serious unskilful actions which would have a big influence on our consciousness. I don't know you well, but maybe you have. I don't know where you've come from or what you've done. You may have done something that you think is really quite unskilful in your life. Sometimes it means that you haven't committed any karma that's difficult to reverse. The weighty karma is quite difficult to reverse. We've got examples of Milarepa and Angulimala, who did reverse the weighty karma of murder, and serial murder. Very heavy karma. But they did manage to reverse it, Milarepa by going through hardship practice, and Angulimala by just meeting the Buddha.

One of the things about the positives of Buddhism is that even if you or I have committed a weighty act, even if it's quite unskilful, we can turn that around even if it takes us a long time. With practice, especially regular practice, we can turn it around. Obviously if we've come into this life, as some human beings do, very positive, and they continue that, it's very fortunate. Maybe it depends on their previous karma. We come mixed. We come to this life with very mixed karma and we can turn our karma around. Some of us – you see this when you've done a lot of teaching – some people seem to come along quite young, and meet the Dharma, and it's very straightforward and their practice seems very easy. It's hard not to envy it sometimes, when it's not been one's own experience! For others of us it's more complex and that may be due to all kinds of things. We can't just say it's due to previous karma – that would be very literalistic. It can be partly due to that, we don't know, or due to our conditioning, and we may have a lot of undoing to do along the way. That's where we're at. I remember Bhante talking about years ago there being four paths, or four ways of experiencing the path in Buddhism: Easy all the way through. Hard in the beginning, easy at the end. Easy in the beginning and hard at the end, and hard all the way through! All bases are always covered in Buddhism, aren't they!

You may have a lot of positive karma and *puṇya* (merit) so you may find your practice easy all the way through. You may find it hard in the beginning and who knows how long the beginning's going to be – you don't know that till later! And then it starts to get easier. Easy at the beginning and hard at the end is kind of interesting. Maybe your practice is easy, but conditions are very difficult, and you find yourself in quite difficult conditions even though mentally things are good. Hard all the way through – maybe we shouldn't go there! Anyway, he said it doesn't matter which one you are, you just keep practising!

That's the first four. Number five of the internal conditions – having faith in the Buddha's teaching and confidence in the spiritual life. That's also reflected when we look at the three kinds of faith, but I suppose this means you have come with quite a positive sense of your own potential. You have a capacity for faith. It may not be developed in terms of complete śraddhā but then when you come across the Dharma and you hear a Dharma talk, you respond. That is all our experience, somewhere along the line whatever you were doing beforehand, sometimes it's sudden, sometimes it's gradual, we've responded to the Dharma. We have that capacity for faith.

One commentator likens these five endowments to having a car (we've got a body), which is on the road (we've met the Dharma), so it's faith in the Buddha and the Dharma, the car's got petrol (so it's free of disabilities – it's got all its engines working), you've got a licence to drive (you've committed no heinous crimes) and you've got confidence to drive (you've got faith). I don't know if that helps – I don't drive! Good thing about riding a bike, I suppose!

We could think, how are we doing with those? We are in a human realm, we've got opportunities for developing ethics, a reasonable amount of culture in our civilization, we've got our sense faculties and our mind, we know we can reverse our karma through our practice, and we know we can develop our faith, so we're doing pretty well!

**Five indirect or circumstantial endowments**

Then come the five circumstantial endowments, or external conditions. We have been born in an era or time when the Buddha has appeared. The Buddha doesn't live down the road, and he didn't live yesterday, but we live in the dispensation of Śākyamuni Buddha. His teachings are still alive, so we are in his time, as it were. We have that endowment. Secondly he has expounded the truth of the Dharma. He wasn't just born and then didn't teach. He did teach, and that Dharma is available to us. Also we live in a time when the teachings are not only available, but they survive. They're being practised, so we have that endowment. And they're being practised by a living Sangha, so we have that contact with other people practising. We've taken up the teachings, we've come into contact with the Dharma and we've taken up the teachings, and we've got favourable conditions in

which to practise those teachings. We've got support from friends, other Sangha members and a teacher.

So those are the ten endowments. We can reflect on each of the eight freedoms and ten endowments and think about where we stand.

**Three kinds of faith - in realities, qualities and capacities**

Lastly, the precious human birth not only has the eight freedoms and the ten endowments, but also the three kinds of faith. I won't go into these in too much detail; maybe we can do these more in the groups, otherwise I'll run over time!

Faith is contained in one of the endowments, but maybe we can unpack what śraddhā is in more detail and more depth. The three kinds of faith really point to the fact that śraddhā is not just an emotion. There are three aspects: a more cognitive aspect, a more emotional aspect and a more volitional aspect. The first is said to be faith in realities, the more cognitive aspect of faith, a response to the Dharma, a response to the Truth, a response to what is. Maybe it's a response to the truth of karma, the truth of conditionality. You think, "Yes, that is the truth." That leads you to a sense of conviction in the truth of the Dharma and that helps you practise. So it's faith not just in the mind, but faith with a more cognitive tinge.

Secondly faith in qualities. This is much more emotional and affective. You really respond to the qualities of the Three Jewels in a more emotional, aesthetic way. It's a very strong movement towards, through feeling. You take delight in the Buddha, Dharma or Sangha, or in some aspects of the Buddha, Dharma or Sangha. When that aspect of faith is in place it is said to feel like everything drops into place. You feel like your life has been confused and then everything starts to drop into place. Faith is said to be like a water purifying gem: all the filth and muddiness are purified and you have a sense of clarity, poise and calmness in your life.

Faith in capacities is the more volitional aspect. Faith in capacities is sometimes called longing faith. This is very important for us. You not only have the other two aspects of faith, but you feel you are capable of attaining Enlightenment. You are capable of following your potential through. You can do, and you want to do, you want to practise. The truth is it might take a long time but it's not infinitely remote. It is something intimately connected with you, that you resonate with and have the capacity for.

We can reflect on those three aspects of faith, and most of us probably have one in play more than the others, and we can think about how we can balance them up, or why that is.

With all those things, freedoms, endowments and faith, we have the precious human birth. Like a wish-fulfilling gem, a chintamani, a precious vase, it's like gold because it enables us to achieve unsurpassable Enlightenment.

**The rarity of human life; what does all this mean for us in the modern West?**

It's also said to be rare and difficult to find. This is one of the other things that we reflect upon. We reflect upon its preciousness and then we reflect upon its rarity. There are different ways of thinking about the fact that the precious human birth is rare. You've probably come across the traditional story of the turtle and the yoke. This is the way it's done classically. We can think about the turtle and the yoke.

The story is that there's a blind turtle that lives for thousands of years sitting at the bottom of the seven oceans. Once every hundred years it comes up to the surface to take a breath. There's also – sometimes it's wooden and sometimes it's golden – a yoke, floating on the surface of the ocean, never staying in one place for longer than a second. What are the chances of the turtle sticking its head through the yoke? That's said to be the chances in this whole vast perspective of us achieving a precious human birth. If it surfaces and doesn't manage to get its head through the yoke, that's sometimes said to be a positive, skilful life, but without the Dharma. If it gets up to the top all the way from down the bottom, and gets its head through the yoke, well that's equivalent to a human birth and going for refuge. So it's a story you can think about…

If that's a bit fanciful, we can reflect that it's rare in the sense that the human birth doesn't arise through chance. It arises through previous skilful, ethical actions. Not many human beings have, not only the human form, but also the freedoms and endowments that arise as a result of ethical action or lead to ethical action. If you look at the wheel of life – and this is the third way of looking at the rarity – at all the beings of the wheel of life, you can reflect that there are many more beings in that wheel of life than there are human beings. There are loads of gods, and animals, and pretas, and hungry ghosts: all those different realms.

If that's too fanciful, and you think, well, I only ever see humans and animals, you could think that if you include microbes and atoms and insects, there are lots more animals than there are humans. You might think, "Do I really think it's rare? There are so many human beings on the planet, is it really rare?" But we're trying to think of the rarity and preciousness of the human birth, with all those freedoms and endowments and faith.

We can take all that and use it as a basis for reflection. We can ask ourselves in more modern terms, what are we, now, in my life, what am I free of? What advantages do I have? Life for any of us is by no means perfect. I don't think any of us would say we have a perfect life, but each one of us is free to practise. We all have time and leisure to practise. That may vary from individual to individual, depending upon other commitments and so on, but we all have time and leisure to practice. We're here on

retreat for example, we've got time and leisure to meditate, to develop our friendships, we can go on retreat. We're free to practise the Dharma in this country and probably in the countries from which others of you come at the moment. We don't know when these things are going to change. We can think what we want to think, and feel what we want to feel, and explore what we want to explore. We probably do have enough money, food, shelter, and in fact many of have probably got more than enough basic food, shelter and money. We've probably got enough health and energy. Maybe we've got illnesses, things wrong with us, but we manage to practise, we manage to meditate, we manage to get on retreat. We in Britain and other Western countries do live in a democracy at least, however imperfect we think that might be, and we're reasonably free from fear and subjugation. So there are lots of things in the world that are going on that we're not happy about, but in terms of our own lives and ability to practise, we've got quite a lot going for us.

We just have to think it through and how that pans out for us. At the same time we can think about the lives of others in comparison, others with fewer of those advantages. We're born in the dispensation of Śākyamuni Buddha at a time when the Dharma, though disappearing from some countries in which it was first alive, is available to us in the West, in fact more and more available to us in the West. We have met the Dharma. We've met a Sangha and we can be part of this Sangha if we choose. We can develop friendships. We can have mentors. I think it's worth reflecting in terms of the Dharma, that we live in a very particular time in the history of the Dharma where so many teachings, practices and traditions of Buddhism are available to us in the West, all at the same time. It's an extraordinary period in Buddhist history. I don't think that there's been one ever quite like it before. There are times like in China which have parallels, but they didn't have the internet! So not only is it available, it's available on the internet, as well as in books. If you just think about books in the last 30 years. I got involved in the Dharma when I was in my early 20s, in 1967 and there were so few books on the Dharma available, and I read them all, in about a week! There were so few books, so few translations, and although some of those translations have since been much improved upon, one felt very grateful, for example, to read the Evans Wentz books on Buddhism, even though the more sort of Jungian way he looked at them is less accurate these days, but you were so grateful to have a book on Buddhism. If I think about that, in my lifetime – not all your lifetimes, but some of us - in my lifetime, if you think about what is available now, you look at the catalogues of Windhorse or Wisdom or other Buddhist publishing houses, there are so many books you can't possibly read all of them. There's so much available for us and really good translations, done by Buddhist academics, and Buddhist translation groups, and so on. There are fantastic opportunities that are very, very new. Then we've got Google! You just put a topic in Google, and off you go! You can spend hours researching the Four Mind Turnings! I'm sure you have.

Then maybe we could ponder and reflect – well, do we think this human birth is precious and rare? What do we think about the turtle, and other realms, and so on? And then we could think, "Ok, what do I think about all that? The advantages I have, so what am I doing with the advantages?" Not in the sense, "I'm a bad person and I watch TV and I

should be meditating!" way, but, "Could I make more of them? Could I help create better conditions for myself and others? What could I do?" As we're reflecting in this way, which we will be doing in the reflections, you can just see what feelings arise. It's not that certain feelings should arise, that it's prescriptive, that you should feel grateful, but reflect and see what happens. It may be that more feelings of appreciation arise than you thought you had and that that does give you more self confidence in yourself and in what you have, as well as a greater sense of meaning and value in your life. Maybe you do treasure your life and body as the basis of practice. In Bhante's seminar on the Jewel Ornament's chapter on the precious human birth, which I was on, he said that if you looked at all of these and thought about it, you could think that you were two thirds of the way there. I can't remember if he meant to Enlightenment, or stream entry, but I remember being really struck with it at the time, because two thirds is quite a long way. He was giving it a very positive take.

Some quotes from verses on this section, which often merges into the next section:
*It's precious and it's rare, valuable, has meaning and it's fragile*.

These are some lines from different verses. So:

*Reflecting on all that, use this opportunity well. Don't be side tracked by meaningless pursuits and fritter it away as you may not obtain this precious human birth again*.

We don't know what's going to happen to us down the track.

> *Don't remain at ease now. Seize the opportunity and practise the Dharma day and night. Be grateful for a single phrase of the Dharma and reflect on its benefits. Make the best of this opportunity, choose well and choose the Dharma. Strive to make fruitful your opportunities and advantages. Our life span is short so do not waste time*.