

STUDYING THE BASIC PROGRAM – A PRECIOUS OPPORTUNITY!

Learning Dharma means less ignorance, more wisdom. It means more light in your life, in your mind, no darkness. That means you have more freedom in your life to achieve liberation from samsara, great enlightenment. The more you understand Dharma means you can educate more, benefit more to others, give more light to others, you can cause them to have deeper and clearer understanding of the Dharma. The benefits of preserving Dharma can't be explained by all the omniscient ones, the Buddhas, even for eons.

The more you hear Dharma, it plants more seed of liberation and enlightenment. It makes it so much easier for future lives, easier to achieve liberation and enlightenment. You have a good, qualified teacher. Therefore take the opportunity to learn Dharma. Don't waste your precious human life.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche,
Encouragement to study BP, ABC 2004

FPMT and Chenrezig Institute offer study Programs of various levels for students with different abilities and needs. Since 1997 we have been able to offer the FPMT Basic Program and soon we start our fifth round of these precious teachings. They provide a more in depth understanding of the Gelugpa path as presented within all our centres, assisting students to deepen their wisdom and practice and in some cases to prepare students to teach on various levels throughout our organisation.

The Main Components of the Program

As an FPMT standard education program, the Basic Program combines academic education, training in ethical behaviour, meditation practice, and service as integral components of the program.

1. The BP study component

The Basic Program subjects are taught on the basis of standard texts and commentaries. Each subject is completed with a test (or several tests for longer subjects). Upon completion of at least the nine core curriculum subjects, a three-month review prepares students for the BP final exam.

The Basic Program designed by Lama Zopa Rinpoche is comprised of a core curriculum of nine subjects and three supplementary subjects.

1. Stages of the Path (Lam Rim – the Graduated Path to Enlightenment)
2. Heart Sutra
3. Mahayana Mind Training
4. Bodhisattva Deeds
5. Mind and Cognition
 - a. Awarenesses and Knowers
 - b. Minds and Mental Factors
6. Tenets

7. Ornament of Clear Realisation (chapter 4)
8. The Tathagata Essence
9. Grounds and Paths of Secret Mantra (parts 1 and 2)

There are three supplementary subjects

10. Seventy Topics
11. The Three Basic Bodies (Birth Death and Intermediate State)
12. Highest Yoga Tantra (A commentary on a specific practice)

The subjects of the BP curriculum were chosen by Lama Zopa Rinpoche; the standard texts and commentaries were decided upon by the FPMT geshees at Rinpoche's request.

Whenever possible texts will be provided by the Basic Program Coordinator but in some cases books may need to be purchased from our bookshop or outside sources.

Subject-completion tests

Each Basic Program subject will be completed by at least one test. For longer subjects there can be several. All students wishing to complete the subject and the entire Program will need to successfully complete these tests and any assignments set.

Tests are valuable study tools. As such, students may even be encouraged to do the test even if they do not want it graded, because it is such a good study tool!

Discussions, and in some cases homework and reading assignments

Discussions add an extra quality to the program that can not be underestimated; they mirror the function of debate in traditional Tibetan education. They invite students into active engagement, help digest the material studied and generally promote an appreciation of the shared experience of studying together.

Questions and doubts which cannot be resolved in discussion groups can be brought to the question and answer session with the teacher.

The three-month final review

Lama Zopa Rinpoche, in consultation with the FPMT geshees, decided on a three-month review period for students to prepare for the BP final exam. FPMT Education Services help greatly by providing Review Guidelines and Review Questions and students find this review time extremely helpful in consolidating their understanding and preparing for the final exam.

The online final exam is then provided by Education Services at the FPMT Online Learning Center for Basic Program students who have completed the nine subjects of the core curriculum and the three-month review. A date will

hopefully be set approximately three months after the completion of the last BP subject, and shortly after concluding the review period.

2. The BP ethical behaviour component

Lama Zopa Rinpoche indicated that it would be good to implement an assessment for moral conduct within the Basic Program; *'moral behaviour is very important. The three main qualities of a student should be knowledge, good moral conduct and loving kindness....'*

Basic Program students therefore commit to train in moral discipline and in practising awareness of their states of mind, especially by developing concern for others and applying the antidotes to anger.

Taking the lay vows is not a requirement. What is encouraged is for BP students to sincerely work on ethical conduct and Buddhist values as an integral part of their Basic Program.

The minimum behaviour should be based on avoiding actions that create disharmony and big problems. Behaviour should be based on that: that which does not harm many people. That is the minimum thing to observe.

The attitude in daily life is to look at everyone as the source of all one's past, present, and future happiness, liberation, and enlightenment. Then also, cherishing and caring for others. That comes under ethics and behaviour, it is ethics of mind or mental ethics. Then on this basis to be helpful and to have respect for others ...

An optional self-evaluation practice is recommended and students will be provided with a booklet to complete to keep their aspirations in mind.

3. The BP practice component

We include meditation practice with the study of the subjects, so as to ensure students are given help integrating the three aspects of hearing, contemplation and meditation. All students are encouraged to attend the daily meditations and to continue with the practice at home on a regular basis.

'Issuing the certificate for the BP is not only from the point of view of having knowledge, rather, it is on the basis of students' moral discipline and their experience of meditation on lam-rim.'

Lama Zopa Rinpoche

The three-month lam-rim retreat

For BP students to qualify for the Basic Program completion certificate, a three-month lam-rim retreat is required.

This can be done during the progress of the program at any time after the

completion of the Stages of the Path or at the completion of the BP, and before or after the final exam. Working people will be able to complete 3 X one month retreats.

4. The BP service and training component

Students are encouraged to contribute to many aspects of the program. They will benefit from the valuable opportunities for service and training that are offered by involving them. They may help by preparing materials, especially in transcribing and/or editing the Geshe's teachings, lead small discussion groups, help with guided meditations and help with preparation and maintenance of our teaching space.

At Chenrezig Institute we require students wishing to complete the courses to undertake approximately three hours of such service each week and encourage all others to take part in this aspect of the course. Such contributions become very enriching for all students.

Basic Program Completion

Subject completion requirements

Having fulfilled the attendance and participation requirements as set by the center - usually 75-80% attendance at all teachings, tutorials, discussions and meditations offered. Attendance sheets will be kept.

Having fulfilled the meditation requirement as set by the center

Having fulfilled the BP behaviour requirement

Having passed the subject completion tests as set by the center

Individual subject completion does not carry any qualification to teach, nor does it make students eligible for FPMT teacher registration.

When a student has completed all the core subjects satisfactorily and has completed the required retreat and the final examination, a Basic Program Certificate will be presented. Such students are then eligible to apply for FPMT teacher registration.

The BP is not primarily taught with the aim of producing teachers in mind though; the general aim is to provide in-depth, structured and ongoing Dharma education to students ready to go beyond introductory level. The final exam and certificate are tools to encourage students to complete and engage in all aspects of the program (behaviour, practice, service, study of the entire curriculum, retreat).

It is to be noted that many of the students who have already graduated from the Basic Program offered at Chenrezig Institute, have gone on to teach at various centres around Australia and the world. We rejoice in this wonderful benefit to

sentient beings!

BP homestudy/online completion certificate option

Students who do not complete all nine core curriculum BP subjects with a 'live' teacher, but do one or more subjects by means of BP Homestudy or BP Online, and have completed the review and final exam and a one-month lam-rim retreat, qualify for a BP Homestudy completion certificate.

The main function of this option is to encourage engagement in all components of the program as envisioned by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, making it possible for these students to experience optimum benefits from participation in the BP.

In addition, BP homestudy graduates are eligible to apply for FPMT teacher registration at Foundational Buddhism level, which qualifies them to teach Discovering Buddhism and Living in the Path at FPMT centers.

The components that constitute the requirements for a completion certificate are:

1. Completion of the nine subjects of the core curriculum BP homestudy - students can complete the subjects by combining center-based BP homestudy/online study with FPMT BP Online subjects or even with BP homestudy offered by other FPMT centers. Combination with some subjects completed inhouse in a center qualifies towards BP homestudy completion as well.
2. Passing the test(s) for subject completion
3. Conduct that accords with Buddhist ethics
To develop the practice of abstention from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct (adultery), and intoxicants, and to be practicing awareness of positive and negative states in one's mind and be developing the practice of patience and concern for others in particular.
4. At least two half-hour lam-rim meditation sessions per week
5. A three-month review period, concluded with the BP final exam
To structure the review period, review questions that indicate the level of the final exam and help getting an overview are provided by FPMT Education Services. The review facilitates integration of the entire Basic Program studies.
6. A lam-rim retreat of at least one month completed in one continuous retreat period of a minimum of four weeks. FPMT Education Services offers guidelines and support materials for individual retreats upon request.