

The Lecture Notes of Chapter Five of the Vimalakirti Sutra

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Lecture 26

A Reminder About Observing Auspicious Days

September, the 22nd of the Tibetan calendar (October 31st, 2018) is the auspicious day of Buddha Shakyamuni's descent from Tushita Heaven to earth. Pure Land Puja is held for 7 days before and after this festival, as one of the four annual Dharma assemblies at Larung Gar. Khenpo urges Dharma friends to get together for group practice during this day, such as reciting the name and the heart mantra of Buddha Amitabha, chanting the *King of Aspiration of Samantabhadra*, and so on.

Observation of auspicious days is a common practice for all religions. Buddhists should at least commemorate the Four Great Festivals, namely: the Festival of Miracles; the Festival of Vaishakha; the Festival of Turning the Wheel of Dharma; and the Festival of Descent from Heaven. On these days it is auspicious to perform virtuous activities such as making offerings, praying to the Three Jewels, reciting mantras and so forth, the merit of which can be multiplied tremendously. Consequently, practitioners will more likely gain deeper realizations or richer meditative experiences. That is why Khenpo called upon us in an earlier notice to observe the upcoming festival.

For some people, it may be difficult to engage full time during the seven days of Pure Land Puja. This is particularly true for householders who already have very tight schedules under the pressure of family and social obligations. However, Khenpo reiterates his earlier request that everyone makes an effort to recite the heart mantra of Buddha Amitabha for 300,000 times. It is best to finish it in a month; if not, the duration can be extended to three months, which boils down to 100,000 recitations per month, or 10,000 in three days. At the conclusion of the puja, all recitations will be combined together and dedicated by the entire Sangha at Larung Gar, so the merit gained by each attendee is incredible. Therefore, everybody is encouraged to take part in this worthy endeavor joyfully.

Our human life is bound to end. When causes and conditions merge, everyone must die without choice. By then, all life's undertakings are left behind, whether finished or unfinished. Whatever things we have toiled to accumulate become utterly useless, and only our virtuous roots and merits will accompany us to the next life. This is the inconceivable power of virtue. So everybody should spare no effort in virtuous practice.

In order to bestow favorable karmic links, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche used to confer Amitabha empowerment to many lay practitioners present at the Pure Land Puja at Larung Gar. Although watching the video record of His Holiness' empowerment ceremony may not carry the same transmission, it would nonetheless grant blessings and plant the seeds of propitious relation to the Pure Land in one's mind. So it is worthwhile for everyone to take a look.

The Proper Attitude of Receiving the Teaching

Khenpo asks the audience to control their wandering minds and to focus on the Dharma, regarding its hearing, contemplation, and practicing as the most worthwhile involvement in life. To some individuals, learning the Dharma is no different from attending courses on an everyday skill or knowledge. Holding such an attitude, Khenpo says, is a sign of underappreciating the value of the Dharma. Ordinary knowledge may solve the problems of this life, but that's all there is to it. The Dharma, on the other hand, cannot only benefit this life, but also sow virtuous seeds for all future lives, bringing forth unsurpassable happiness free from suffering. Therefore, rather than working hard to pursue wealth, fame, a successful career, beautiful looks and so forth, Khenpo feels that a consummate life should entail attaining spiritual realization, experiencing signs of accomplishment, and actualizing blessings, all through the power of Dharma study. In the wake of the Dharma's profound significance, it's only fitting that we always treasure it and listen to the teachings constantly with an eager and joyful heart. In fact, without sustained enthusiasm, passion, and heartfelt conviction, no task can progress smoothly. Some Buddhists may start their Dharma studies most fervently with faith and devotion ablaze like fire. But as time goes on and they weather life's ups and downs, their passion and faith is slowly reduced to tiny flames flickering in the wind. In the end, they become jaded and indifferent about the Dharma. Isn't this situation most lamentable!

Dharma teachers should also uphold the zeal for propagating the Dharma. If the teachers only lead classes mechanically and indifferently, how can their students become interested in studying at all? Dejected and listless teachers do not breed enthusiastic and eager students; this is absolutely predictable. Therefore, whether one engages in spiritual or worldly pursuit, it's crucial to keep one's initial aspiration and dreams alive until the very end, which is a common trait in many successful entrepreneurs.

During the course of study, we must maintain an attentive mindset. It is only appropriate to refrain from distraction when receiving the teaching. The more sincerity one applies to Dharma studying, the more abundant blessings one will receive. On the other hand, if one believes Dharma teachings to be ordinary and dispensable, and, at the slightest hint of boredom clicks off the lecture midway and switches to something else, what benefit is there? Remember, the profundity of the Dharma is not easy to fathom even with single-minded concentration; needless to say a chaotic and scattered mind—no comprehension will ever dawn in it!

A Brief Review of the Previous Chapters

As we know, the *Vimalakirti Sutra* is well known in both Han and Tibetan Buddhism, and many great masters place great importance on it. Khenpo himself has received the transmission from a pure and unbroken oral lineage, which he is imparting onto us now. To hold the blessings of a pure lineage is very conducive for comprehending, practicing, and propagating the teaching. These effects may not be obvious right away, but will become apparent when scores of masters who follow this lineage begin to teach this sutra in future times.

The *Vimalakirti Sutra* is actually a sutra with convincing logic. In general, sutras such as the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* are not structured with the orderly reasoning found in the *Buddhist Logics (Hetuvidya)*. The gist of sutras, being multidimensional and buried in colossal volumes, are like precious gems scattered in a huge treasure vault, from which coral, gold, and silver are found here and there. But the *Vimalakirti Sutra* differs in that its arguments progress logically from one step to the next, which is evident at least from the preceding chapters.

The first chapter, *Buddha Land*, is a preface explaining how this sutra came about. It also emphasizes the final goal of this sutra—“As one’s mind is pure, one’s land will be pure”; the second chapter, *Skillful Means*, shows Vimalakirti’s inconceivably skillful means in propagating the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings, which is what we should emulate; the third chapter, *Disciples*, tells the Buddha’s request to his Shravaka disciples to visit Vimalakirti; and in the fourth chapter *Bodhisattvas*, the Buddha turned his request to bodhisattvas, represented by Maitreya, Radiance Ornament Youth, Maintains the World, and the Elder’s Son Good Virtue. All these shravakas and bodhisattvas recounted their stories on

how they had met and been chided by Vimalakirti on various occasions. According to the commentary of Tiantai master Zhiyi, in Chapter 3 & 4, as well as the second half of Chapter 2, the teachings were given outside Vimalakirti's home with an approach of reproaching and convincing, and in the following six chapters the teachings were given at his home with an approach of guiding and attracting. Both approaches help the listeners to enter into the gate of the ultimate truth, and make the Mahayana teaching flourish in this world.

Manjushri's Praise to Vimalakirti

At this point the Buddha addressed Manjushri, "You go inquire about Vimalakirti's illness."

Earlier, the Buddha had asked his chief disciples and bodhisattvas to visit Vimalakirti, but they were reluctant to go out of fear, each recounting how in the past Vimalakirti had embarrassed them by his brash wit. Now the time comes for the Buddha to ask Manjushri to go. This is a highly anticipated moment, and it would have been immensely fascinating to watch what sparks would fly when the two illustrious minds of Vimalakirti and Manjushri collide. This episode is handled with extraordinary skill. By arranging the disciples' appearance in a certain order, we get to hear the unique stories of Shariputra, Maudgalyayana, and so forth, which otherwise would not have happened had Manjushri been asked in earlier rounds rather than in the grand finale.

Khenpo himself feels humbled by the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, of which he says that he previously only had a superficial knowledge. He is grateful to the audiences whose convergence along with other favorable factors gives him the opportunity to teach, making him dig deeper into this exquisite Mahayana classic and study it intently. It is certain that everyone, Khenpo included, will gain a richer experience and comprehension of this sutra through this study.

Manjushri appears in a youthful form of a sixteen-year-old prince, who is foremost in wisdom and dedicated to enlightening sentient beings. Indeed, according to different sources, Manjushri is a buddha but manifests as a bodhisattva. For example, the *Surangama Samadhi Sutra* says that Manjushri is a fully enlightened ancient buddha named the "Supreme Naga King Tathagata"; the *Sutra of the Heap of Jewels* says Manjushri will become a future buddha named the "Universally-Being-Seen Tathagata"; while the *Angulimaliya Sutra* says

Manjushri is a present buddha named the “Joyous Treasury of Mani Ratnakuta Tathagata”, living in a world called “Always-Joyous World” in the north of this planet.

Some people or scholars, especially in the West, might have regarded Manjushri merely as an imaginary figure or an icon personifying supreme wisdom whose flaming sword symbolizes the eradication of delusion. On the one hand, it is true that Manjushri is the embodiment of the wisdom of all past, present and future buddhas; on the other hand, he is indeed a real enlightened being who appeared as a great bodhisattva at the time of Buddha Shakyamuni and continues to manifest in all kinds of forms in order to lead different living beings to enlightenment. For example, his manifestations were frequently recognized at Mount Wutai.

Since Westerners are not familiar with the history of buddhas and bodhisattvas, early Buddhist masters have placed more emphasis on their symbolism and implications when introducing Buddhist deities to the West, such as: “Avalokiteshvara represents great compassion, which is epitomized by a lotus flower; Manjushri embodies wisdom and his sword signifies cutting off ignorance, etc.” This measure was taken to prevent Western students from confusing Buddhist figures and stories with the mythical tales of other religious traditions. Granted, pictorial explanation is an expedient way to facilitate understanding for some students; however, it should be made clear that buddhas and bodhisattvas were not just symbolizations, but rather historical figures who accomplished extraordinary deeds and spiritual realization.

Colorful stories are also found in other faiths besides Buddhism; some of the accounts bear a mythological flavor while others are actual milestones in human history. Every religion evolves through its own origins and traditions. So we’d better to be respectful to these stories and traditions, and at the same time, examine them closely. In this way, we won’t fall prey to biased views.

Speaking of biased views, how does bias come about? When we were little, we were like a blank piece of paper free from the marks of opinions. Later, through education and the influences of environment and people around us, we slowly accumulate experiences and build up preferences, which began to solidify. For example, a person born into an atheist family will grow up to have an atheistic worldview very different from those of a religious family. Even though the acquired view may not be valid, the person would believe it to be so as time goes on. This is something worth thinking about.

Therefore, we'd better not hold stubbornly to our own ideas as utterly unerring. This is why the Buddha encouraged his followers to analyze his words critically in the same way a goldsmith tests his gold:

*O bhikkhus and wise men,
just as a goldsmith would test his gold
by burning, cutting, and rubbing it,
so you must examine my words and accept them,
but not merely out of reverence for me.*

Accept them only if they are found to be rational, and abandon them if they are not. This is an important aphorism in Buddhism.

Manjushri addressed the Buddha, “World-honored One, that superior one is difficult to respond to.

Even though Manjushri himself is preeminent in wisdom, given Vimalakirti's unfathomable and splendid qualities, Manjushri did not state that the visit would be simple and easy. Here he praised Vimalakirti as “the Superior One.” In Xuanzang's translations, Vimalakirti is addressed as “the Great Being”.

Different interpretations of “the Superior One” are found in sutras. According to *Ekottara Agama*, “the Superior one” refers to person who repents mistakes and strives for reform. The *Ten Stanzas of Vinaya* classifies monastics into four types: the coarse one, the confused one, the middle one, and the superior one. The coarse one has no sense of personal integrity or propriety, and is not good at understanding both words and meaning of the Dharma; the confused one has no sense of personal integrity but is good at understanding words and meaning of the Dharma; the middle one has a sense of personal integrity but is not good at understanding words and meaning of the Dharma; the superior one has a sense personal integrity or propriety, and also is good at understanding both words and meaning of the Dharma.

In the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, “the Superior One” entails not only a mere intellectual understanding of words and meaning of the Dharma, but more importantly, an aspiration of forsaking one's own happiness for the benefit of others. A teaching in the *Treatise on the*

Great Perfection of Wisdom echoes: “Anyone who abandons his own happiness and engages in virtuous activities for the benefit of all sentient beings, is called the superior one.”

We ordinary beings find it impossible to forego completely our own interest, however, as Mahayana practitioners, we must always bear sentient beings in mind. His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche once composed a prayer of aspiration saying that:

In this and all my lifetimes to come,

May I always rely on the sublime gurus and yidams.

May I master the meaning of the oceanic Tripitakas.

May I spread the Dharma and help beings vastly and skillfully.

Obviously, it is crucial to implore gurus, yidams, and Dharma protectors to care for us in all our lifetimes. Indeed, without their blessings and protection, if we merely rely on our own wisdom and ability, we will have a bumpy ride in propagating Dharma and benefiting sentient beings. This Khenpo can attest to with his own experience and observation in his life. Even if one is temporarily smart and eloquent and accepted by some people, without the blessings from gurus and Dharma protectors, it is uncertain if this person can eventually shoulder the responsibility of spreading the Dharma.

Some individuals tend to complain about teachers or teachings, and are quick to suggest doing things in this way or that way. However, should tasks be handed to them, they often fail within several years, probably because they have deprived themselves of the blessings from lamas and protectors. Hence, to become a genuine “Superior One”—whether in life, in practice, or in raising the Dharma banner—we must always entreat blessings from gurus and deities.

For atheists, they simply can’t accept the idea of the power of blessings because they only believe in tangible things and practical information. To them, invisible forces are as far-fetched as fairy tales. We are not saying that they must concur with us, but this issue begs our attention.

“He has profoundly attained the true characteristic, and he is good at explaining the essentials of the Dharma.

“His eloquence is unhampered, and his wisdom is unhindered.

Vimalakirti realized the ultimate truth of all phenomena. On top of having perfected himself, he was skilled in giving essential teachings to different people according to their capacities. When he expounded the Dharma, whether in debate or in explicating words and meanings, his power of speech never faltered, and no one could contest his immeasurable insight. From the relative perspective, his eloquence is unhampered; from the ultimate perspective, his wisdom is unhindered. In the Tibetan version, the unhindered wisdom is interpreted as the wisdom free from animosity toward others.

In Sanskrit and Japanese versions, “he is good at explaining the essentials of the Dharma” is elaborated as “he is good in explaining the common and uncommon Dharma,” or, “he can explain the Dharma extensively and in summation.” The feature “to be good at explaining” is a common quality in Buddhist scriptures. This relates to the skillful way of expounding the Dharma after having experienced for oneself the nature of reality. However, without gaining proficiency in verbal delivery, any attempt to teach the Dharma may fail miserably, even if one has studied and practiced extensively.

Given this situation, Khenpo cautions that as a Mahayana Buddhist, one must gain proficiency in the skill of communicating and getting along well with people, knowing the preferences and inclinations of others. In Mipham Rinpoche’s *The Codes for Kings*, there is a chapter dealing with the art of communication in which he said that words are an essential tool for communication, and misusing words could be the main cause for conflicts among family members or with enemies. Without getting a good handle on speaking, one may offend a lot of people with one sentence. On the other hand, truly nicely spoken words will neither upset others nor backfire on the speaker; rather, everyone can benefit from those words. *The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* also says

*Kind words are those that neither,
Cause afflictions to the speaker,
Nor hurt the feeling of others.
Such is the characteristic of kind words.*

The skillful use of kind words can put the speaker at ease and cause no confusion to audience. Indeed, even a single teaching has the power of making indelible marks in one’s mind for life. For example, merely one single message of some sublime masters can bring forth enormous benefit to the listeners. Or, just by beholding their faces, one can truly experience the

extraordinary transmission of their blessings. All in all, interpersonal skills are worth the effort to develop, whether as a monastic Dharma teacher or an ordinary individual.

“He completely understands all the department of the bodhisattvas, and he has entered into all the secret storehouses of the buddhas.

“He has subjugated the host of Maras, and disports himself in the numinous penetrations. He has already attained perfection in his wisdom and skillful means.

From the standpoint of benefiting others, Vimalakirti understood all the rules of bodhisattva activities and was skillful in propagating Dharma and benefiting all sentient beings. From the standpoint of benefiting himself, “he has entered into all the secret storehouses of the buddhas,” and the Tibetan version adds “and bodhisattvas” at the end, meaning that he entered all secret states of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and that nothing in their treasure trove, such as the union of equality and purity, was beyond his grasp.

Vimalakirti skillfully subjugated all the four kinds of Maras, also mastered supernatural powers, and enjoyed demonstrating them playfully in front of different living beings without any hindrance, in such a way as to inspire them to the Mahayana practice.

Vimalakirti was superb in wisdom and skillful means, with which he accomplished the task of liberating sentient beings handily. Having achieved high spiritual realization, bodhisattvas come to see all worldly phenomena as being illusory and dreamlike, and they can travel to all places unobstructed and without any attachment. In *The Sutra of the Heap of Jewels*, there is a very good stanza:

By perceiving the world as an illusion,

The wise travels around with no attachment.

His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche once gave a teaching, saying that when we have genuinely perfected the wisdom of emptiness and the activities of benefiting others, we will be able to freely travel around the world while never departing from the blessing of Manjushri. At that time, no matter what happiness or misery befalls on us, we remain unfettered. Seeing things as a dream, an illusion and so on, we realize that this world has no inherent reality.

Speaking of the view “all phenomena are like illusions and dreams”, it is not about an unreal and imaginary state as someone might have misconstrued. Rather, it refers to our real world which lacks of intrinsic existence but possesses a mesmerizing power that shapes people’s habitual patterns and forces them to be deeply attracted by various phenomena. For example, although we know dreams are not real we very often stay in our dreams and become attached to its content, and then consequently develop all kinds of feelings and emotions due to our habitual tendencies. In the same way, we may have learned intellectually that the world is impermanent and illusory, like a rainbow or a mirage, yet we cannot deny it because we are utterly enthralled.

Today the entertainment industry manages to catch people’s fancy; some youth become so addicted that they binge on TV shows or movies or online games day and night. Even though knowing that it is bad for them, they willingly sink themselves in the unreal world of screens. If we examine with wisdom, it is obvious that not only commercial shows but also all the phenomena we live in are nothing but phantom plays in dreams. Nonetheless, before we wake up we are stuck, finding no way out. So the Buddha’s saying “like illusions, like dreams” does not connote voidness or nothingness; rather, it alludes to a kind of spellbinding power that makes us ready to be seduced and get trapped in, without even noticing it.

In the Xuanzang’s translation, there is one more sentence at the end of this paragraph, saying: “Vimalakirti has attained fearless decisiveness with regard to all questions and answers, and someone with feeble defenses will not be able to converse with him.”

“Nevertheless, I will accept your sagely purport and proceed to inquire about his illness.”

Thereupon the bodhisattvas, great disciples, Indras, Brahmas, and the four heavenly kings in the assembly all thought, “Now these two great bodhisattvas Manjushri and Vimalakirti will have a discussion. They will certainly explain a wondrous Dharma.” At the time eight thousand bodhisattvas, five hundred shravakas, and a hundred thousand gods all wanted to follow along.

Manjushri and the congregation of bodhisattvas and great disciples, with the gods reverentially surrounding them, then entered the great city of Vaisali.

Having expressed the admiration of Vimalakirti, Manjushri would still proceed to call on him. Here the Buddha’s request is described as a sagely purport, and in the Tibetan version, it is

interpreted as the Buddha's grace or blessing to sustain this visit. So in the following text, although it seems mainly about the dialogue between Vimalakirti and Manjushri, the Buddha's silence indeed plays an important role as the source of blessing for the whole event.

The gods, bodhisattvas, and many others could not wait to witness what would prove to be a spectacular encounter between the two sages. Thereupon, Manjushri, reverently surrounded by this throng of bodhisattvas, major disciples, and heavenly beings, proceeded in a grand manner to enter the city of Vaisali.

As we can see, back in that time wisdom was highly valued by the majority of people. But now in this modern time, people put more emphasis on material wealth and temporal gain and loss. They are fascinated by various external phenomena while neglecting the precious value of inner realization. Indeed, in order to achieve genuine happiness, material and spiritual developments need to be synchronized.

The Empty Room

At that time the Elder Vimalakirti thought, "Now Manjushri and a great congregation is coming."

Then with his numinous power he emptied out his room, removing what was there as well as his servants. He left only a single couch, upon which he reclined in his illness.

Vimalakirti knew in advance that Manjushri with his great assembly of followers would come. At once he employed his numinous powers to empty his room, clearing it of all its furniture, decorations, retainues, and servants, so the room was utterly empty. There was no furniture or people around him, except a single bed.

Previously, we learned that Vimalakirti was astronomically wealthy and he lived in a stately mansion with luxurious decorations. Now, all these were made to disappear except for a lone bed. Why did he do so? In fact, all of these displays have hidden meanings: The absence of retainues represents the emptiness of sentient beings; the absence of material goods indicates the emptiness of phenomena; while the sole bed denotes the support of nirvana.

Thus, Vimalakirti left a single bed, upon which he reclined in his illness. This is a scene often depicted in art forms commemorating Vimalakirti, which actually represents his skillful

means of enlightening living beings. In the past, King Songtsen Gampo appeared in Tibetan borders executing enemies, a scene seemingly contradictory to his great compassion. However, the fact is that the king conjured up illusory armies to subjugate illusory foes for pedagogic purposes.

Certainly, bodhisattvas' enlightened activities are beyond the comprehension of the ordinary mind. To worldly eyes, Vimalakirti was an enviable householder who retained massive wealth and huge retinues. Yet Vimalakirti can either enjoy them fully to his heart's content, or make them disappear instantly without any clinging. Such a feat of making transformations is achieved by the power of samadhi that is often seen in great masters and bodhisattvas.

Manjushri entered the house, and he saw the room was empty, with [Vimalakirti] lying alone on a single couch.

Then Vimalakirti said, "Welcome, Manjushri. You have come with the characteristic of not coming; you see with the characteristic of not seeing."

Manjushri said, "So it is, retired scholar. If one has come, there is no more coming. If one has gone, there is no more going. Why? To come is to come from nowhere; to go is to proceed nowhere. That which can be seen is then invisible."

Upon the arrival, Vimalakirti greeted and showed respect to Manjushri by saying "Welcome!" Then he said, "You've come here without the characteristic of coming, you see without the characteristic of seeing me." In the Tibetan and Xuanzang's version, there is one more sentence, "you hear without the characteristic of hearing me". Although Manjushri did arrive with a big assembly, in the ultimate truth there is neither coming nor going. In the same way, there is no such thing as seeing or hearing on the ultimate level despite their seeing and hearing each other in the empty room. As it is said in the *Diamond Sutra*:

Whosoever says that the Tathagata goes or comes, stands, sits or lies down, he does not understand the meaning of my teaching. And why? "Tathagata" is called one who has not gone anywhere, nor come from anywhere. Therefore is he called "the Tathagata, the Arhat, the fully Enlightened One".

In reply, Manjushri agreed with Vimalakirti. The reasoning is given as follows: If one has come, one cannot come again, because the state of “coming” is already past; if one has not come, then one can never come because the state of “coming” is not existent; furthermore, apart from “having come” and “having not yet come”, “coming” itself is unattainable at the present moment. Likewise, if anything has gone, there is no more going, because the state of “going” is already past; if anything has not gone, then one can never go because the state of “going” is not existent; furthermore, “going” itself is also unattainable. From the ultimate perspective, to come is to come from nowhere, to go is to go to nowhere, and thus they are not different in essence. The same goes to seeing and not seeing, as well as hearing and not hearing. This is indicated in the second chapter of *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, which states:

What has been moved is not moving.

What has not been moved is not moving.

Apart from what has been moved and what has not been moved,

Movement cannot be conceived.

“But enough of this matter. Retired scholar, can this illness be forborn? In its treatment is it diminished, so as not to increase? The World-Honored One has made immeasurable courteous inquiries about you.

“Retired scholar, what is the cause from which this illness arises? Has it been affecting you long? How will it be extinguished?”

Manjushri went on, “Let us put this argument of the ultimate truth aside for the moment. Is your illness bearable? How did the treatment go?” He also conveyed many courteous inquiries from the Buddha, such as the following from the Tibetan versions: “How is the condition of your health? Do you have slight trouble, slight discomfort? Is your distress light?” But mainly, there are three questions that Vimalakirti would address in the following text: What is the cause of this illness? Has it been with you long? And how can it be cured?

Speaking of sickness, it is inescapable as long as we have a body of flesh and blood; it’s just a matter of time according each individual’s lot. This applies not only to ordinary people but also to eminent masters. Khenpo told a story of a Buddhist monk named Silabhadra of the sixth century.

Silabhadra was an eminent scholar and the abbot of Nalanda Monastery in India of the sixth century. When he was more than one hundred years old, Xuanzang made a perilous trip from China to India in order to study Buddhism and translate Buddhist scriptures into Chinese. When the two first met, Silabhadra broke into tears and choked up with sobs. Puzzled, Xuanzang asked why. Then Silabhadra's student Buddhahadra related the following: Three years ago, Silabhadra became gravely ill so that he was about to abandon his life. At that time Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri and Maitreya appeared in his dream, saying that his illness was the ripened effect of his previous evil deeds. In one of his past lives, he was a king and had afflicted many people, for which he had to suffer the excruciating physical pain of illness in this life. In order to dispel this suffering, he should spare no effort to widely spread the Mahayana teachings.

Manjushri also told him, "There will be a monk coming from Tang China who seek you out for the Dharma study, you should transmit him the Buddhadharma and by doing so, you will recover completely." Hearing this, Silabhadra gave up his earlier intention of ending his own life. When they finally met, Silabhadra imparted to Xuanzang all the exquisite Dharma teaching and not long after completing this mission, he entered into nirvana.

There is another story about a monk's suicide due to his serious sickness in *Agama Sutra*. The monk is called Channa, and being seriously ill, he thought of killing himself to end his misery. Shariputra went over to console him, "Venerable Channa, is your sickness bearable? Is it getting worse or better?" Channa replied, "My illness is beyond cure and my pain is utterly excruciating. I just wish to take a knife and kill myself." Shariputra replied, "Venerable Channa, you should make an effort, do not harm yourself. I will offer you much food, money, and medicine, and I will send my disciples to take care of you." Channa replied: "As a senior monk, I do not lack anything regarding robes, blankets, food, medicine, or disciples. Yet my pain is simply inconsolable, I don't want to live on anymore!" Then Shariputra gave him many teachings on the selflessness, but Channa replied that he had already knew all of them, just that the pain was too overwhelming. So eventually Channa committed suicide.

Obviously it is not easy even for spiritual practitioners to face illness with equanimity. But committing suicide is a grave error that we should avoid. Nowadays, the world is pervaded with sufferings that torment people both physically and mentally, and the suicide rate is on

the rise. Given this situation, a proper training of the mind is quite necessary to prevent victims from resorting to this drastic measure.

There is an excellent teaching from Geshe Potowa that can help us cultivate a healthy mindset towards illness: Things in the world don't just happen suddenly. Most people, however, think otherwise and are prone to complain: "Illness takes hold of those who should not be sick; death claims those who should have lived on; and bad luck strikes those who don't deserve it." Yet, these complaints cannot be justified. In fact, people who succumb to illness are exactly those who should be ill, and people who died are those who should die. Birth, aging, illness, and death never arrive by accident. If one doesn't want to experience them, "birth" must first be uprooted; to uproot birth, afflictions must be eradicated; and to eradicate afflictions, negative emotions must be identified and worked with. Geshe Potowa really hit the spot with these great remarks.

Lecture 27

Cherish the Opportunity of Receiving the Dharma Teaching

As usual, Khenpo reminded the audience that they should receive the Dharma teaching with a joyous and respectful mind, which is a proper attitude towards the Dharma. Indeed, as Dharma practitioners, we should show our sincere reverence and devotion to the Dharma, and our respect to a Dharma teacher should also rely on his/her transmission and interpretation of the Dharma given to us.

Khenpo urged Buddhist practitioners to meticulously study and contemplate the Dharma in the long run, and this is a way to practice. Overall, an auspicious opportunity of receiving and practicing the Dharma teaching with all favorable conditions is rare and precious. Particularly in these modern time of denegation, there are many global issues arising in regards to politics, economy, faith and belief, which cause more uncertainty and upheaval to the entire world. As a result, it is not always possible for Buddhists to possess every perfect condition to study and practice the Dharma. Keeping this in mind, we do need to cherish this opportunity to receive the sublime Mahayana teaching, because it will bring us numerous benefits in this and all future life times.

Khenpo, who has a huge number of followers on his accounts of Weibo, WeChat and other social media, has observed that there are only a small percentage of Buddhists, probably less than 10%, who follow the Dharma teaching in a steady way, a percentage that is far from satisfactory. Many people claim themselves to be Buddhists but actually do not live up to their identity. What they seek is probably the vanity of being Buddhists. They would rather travel around with some gurus or for certain big Buddhist events. Receiving the full transmission of any single treatise seems to be an impossible task for these “touring Buddhists”, not to mention understanding the whole teaching of the “view, practice, action and fruit” in Buddhism.

This just indicates that their mindsets are restless and anxious, and their wisdom superficial and unstable. As Khenpo mentioned, “Maybe I am being negative to give such comments, but from my observation in recent years, the overall situation of Buddhists all over the world makes me feel disappointed.” Truly, it is such a pity that most Buddhists are not interested in studying and practicing the Dharma. Maybe this is a sign of the degenerate age.

But obviously, there are still devoted and diligent followers who spend much effort in studying the Dharma. Some overseas students, despite being in different time zones, get up as early as 4 or 5 am to attend the live Dharma teaching. They are persistent in the study of a certain sutra or shastra and never miss one session. Khenpo is really happy for their remarkable efforts in overcoming all kinds of obstacles.

So from Khenpo's point of view, he is more than happy to give the Dharma teachings in all possible situations, regardless of his busy schedules and his poor health condition. He said, "As I have tried all my best, even if in the future we do not have any opportunity to study the Dharma together, I will have no regret."

In terms of the study of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, Khenpo encourages the audience to refer to different translations and commentaries so as to gain a deeper understanding of this sutra. This is a well-established tradition at Larung Gar. No matter what we study, we would find all different sources of different lineage masters, trying to comprehend their explanations and their insight together with our own analysis. In doing so, we would not have too much trouble to gain a full grasp of this sutra.

At the very least, we are indeed very fortunate to be able to make a connection with these Mahayana teachings whether or not we are able to fully understand this sutra. Even if we only have a glimpse of what this sutra talks about, we've planted a seed of enlightenment in our mind that will ripen in the near future.

About Vimalakirti's Illness

In the previous text, upon Manjushri and the grand assembly's arrival, Vimalakirti greeted all visitors lying alone on a couch in an empty room. Manjushri asked Vimalakirti, "What is the cause from which this illness arises? Has it been affecting you long? How will it be extinguished?" In reply, Vimalakirti first answered when his illness began and when it would be cured, and then at last, what was the cause of his illness.

Vimalakirti said, “From stupidity there is affection, and hence the generation of my illness¹ (or: the illness of self). Since all sentient beings are ill, therefore I am ill. If the illness of all sentient beings were extinguished, then my illness would be extinguished.

Here stupidity means the ignorance of the true reality, and affection refers to the craving to the three types of existence in desire realm, form realm and formless realm, which are the first and the eighth link in the twelve links of dependent origination. The cyclic existence of samsara begins with ignorance, through the twelve links of ignorance, formations, consciousness, name and form, the six sensory sources, contact, sensation, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and old age and death, an endless circle of birth and death is formed in samsara.

Briefly speaking, ignorance is identical to craving in essence. Formations originate from ignorance, clinging originates from craving and becoming originates from clinging. The links from consciousness to clinging originate from formations; birth and old age and death arise from becoming; and ignorance originates from old age and death. Thus, the wheel of samsara turns and turns.

Hence, to answer the question how long had he been ill, Vimalakirti said, “I’ve been ill ever since there was ignorance.” Unlike ordinary beings who become sick due to an improper diet, bad sleep, contagious infection, and many other physical reasons, Vimalakirti’s illness began in a quite special way, “Since all sentient beings are ill due to their ignorance, then I am ill.” Vimalakirti’s illness began with sentient beings’ ignorance and their mental afflictions.

Consequently, Vimalakirti’s illness will be extinguished when there is no sentient being falling sick. So his situation depends on sentient beings’ situation. When their sickness is cured, Vimalakirti will recover from his illness; and if all living beings are relieved of sickness, Vimalakirti will not fall sick. His illness will last as long as do the sickness of all living beings.

Here we can compare bodhisattvas’ illnesses with that of ordinary beings in three aspects: the cause of illness, the result of illness and the symptom of illness. For ordinary beings, the cause of illness is mental afflictions and ignorance while the result is the five aggregates

¹ An alternative translation that is closer to the original meaning should be **From stupidity and the affection for existence, there comes the generation of my illness.**

(forms, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness), and the symptom is all kinds of physical and mental suffering.

However, for bodhisattvas, the cause of illness is great compassion, the result is their ceaseless manifestations in samsara for the sake of sentient beings, and the symptoms manifested are the same as those of ordinary sentient beings, having various pains such as headache, backache and so on.

If we try to investigate the difference between bodhisattvas' and ordinary people's symptoms, we may not see a big difference because bodhisattvas manifest illness in the same way as ordinary sentient beings. Sometimes we see poor patients suffering a lot, and bodhisattvas can manifest exactly the same symptoms. But their causes are completely different.

Illness can destroy people's power, strength, courage and vigor. As *The Sutra of the Heap of Jewels* goes,

*Illness destroys power and strength,
Wipes out courage and vigor,
Damages the aggregation of sensory faculties,
And leads to emaciation and helplessness.*

Illness damages our sense faculties, leads to the decay of our powers and finally makes us alone and helpless in the world. When bodhisattvas and ordinary people get sick, they both appear very much helpless, just like what Patrul Rinpoche describes in his *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, being fallen ill is like a sparrow hit by a rock, completely weak and powerless. For this reason, many people from Vaisali city went to inquire about Vimalakirti's illness as he lay sick on his bed.

Why? Bodhisattvas enter samsara on behalf of sentient beings. Because there is samsara, there is illness. If sentient beings were able to transcend illness, then bodhisattvas would not also be ill.

Here is the reason. Although bodhisattvas have no afflictions and ignorance, in order to liberate sentient beings from samsara, they choose to take rebirth in samsara. And because they have entered samsara, there must be illness within this wheel of birth and death. In this way, bodhisattvas' illness is actually sentient beings' illness. Whenever sentient beings are ill,

bodhisattvas will appear to be ill. When all sentient beings are free of illness, bodhisattvas will no longer fall ill.

His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, for example, is truly a great bodhisattva. For those who did not know him or had not stayed with him closely, they may not recognize his transcendent qualities and merits, and not really consider him as a bodhisattva. However, his close disciples, such as Khenpo Sodargye, are deeply attracted by his intangible power and blessing, and fully believe he is an uncommon, great bodhisattva.

Why? His Holiness matched perfectly all the qualities of bodhisattvas described in all Mahayana sutras. His powerful blessings and his attractive teachings have inspired numerous people to generate bodhichitta in their mind. He came to this world and gave living beings precious teachings, and after turning the wheel of the Dharma for years, he left for the pure land in a free manner. There was much evidence confirming that he was indeed a real bodhisattva.

In some of his manifestations, he exchanged his health for the illness and suffering of others. His cardiopathy was actually a manifestation of his great compassion. The disease was widespread at that time in the local area, so His Holiness would frequently take other's heart disease and their pain upon himself. In this way, he manifested as having chest pain from time to time. Also, when some naughty young monks hit wild dogs with rocks, His Holiness would manifest being hit as well and undergo great pain.

In this manner, great bodhisattvas abide in samsara with compassion and would take away all negative karmas of sentient beings. In the *Treatise of Entering the Mahayana Path*, it says,

*As the suffering of birth and death is long-endured,
Bodhisattvas are supposed to enter nirvana;
Yet with the mind of great compassion,
They choose to continue to stay in the ocean of suffering.*

Bodhisattvas have the ability to enter nirvana, yet with the mind of great compassion they choose to stay in samsara for the sake of sentient beings. Thanks to their appearance in our world, war, famine and all sorts of adversities would naturally disappear. And for this reason bodhisattvas get "sick". When sentient beings are relieved from their sickness and when their karmic obscurations are lessened, bodhisattvas will also recover from their sickness. The

health condition of bodhisattvas is indeed closely related to that of the sentient beings around them.

“It is like an elder whose only son becomes ill, and the parents become ill as well. If the son recovers from the illness, the parents also recover. Bodhisattvas are like this. They have affection for sentient beings as if for their own children. When sentient beings are ill the bodhisattvas are ill also, and when sentient beings recover from their illness the bodhisattvas recover also.”

Imagine that the only child of the parents is severely ill, then due to their anxiety and their hard work in taking care of the only child, the parents become ill as well. When the child recovers from illness, the parents will also naturally recover. There is a Tibetan saying that the heart of a mother is as tender as water while the heart of a son is as hard as a rock. This is common in our world. *Words of My Perfect Teacher* also says that, when children are sick, many parents wish that sickness can be shifted on themselves instead. And when they see their children suffering from illness but there is nothing they can do, the parents feel excruciating pain in their hearts.

Bodhisattvas are likewise. They love and care for sentient beings as parents love their only child and they suffer for sentient beings the same way as the parents suffer for their only child. When sentient beings are ill, bodhisattvas are ill. When sentient beings recover from their illness, so do bodhisattvas. Whether the bodhisattvas manifest good or bad mood and health, it is very much related to the sentient beings’ karmic situation. Not to mention the great bodhisattvas, even for us who aspire for bodhichitta, we will feel sad and a strong sense of compassion when seeing others suffer greatly.

Khenpo mentioned that in some remote areas on his recent trip in Africa, he witnessed the shortage of food, widespread famine and disease, and frequent local conflicts. He said, “As a Mahayana practitioner, again and again I was deeply touched by their poor situation and was really eager to do something to help them. But what I could do was so limited and I often felt desperate, like an arm-less mother witnessing her only child being washed away in the river. In most cases, good intention alone is not enough. Just as Mipham Rinpoche said, we need skillful means and wisdom in benefiting others, otherwise the initial good intention could become a cause of mental afflictions.”

He also said, “From what cause does this illness arise? The illness of bodhisattvas arises from great compassion.”

Vimalakirti now answered the cause of his illness, which is the great compassion. Sometimes we regard someone as a real bodhisattva. However when this person gets sick, we feel sorry for him or her as we do for ordinary beings. In fact, great bodhisattvas will never get sick due to their own situation as they have already eradicated their ignorance and mental afflictions, which are the root cause of being sick. But their illness will arise from their compassion for sentient beings, this is a very important teaching that we need to keep in mind.

Generally speaking, there are several occasions in which bodhisattvas will manifest to be sick. First, through their manifestation of being sick, people can be inspired to realize the impermanent reality of birth, old age, sickness and death; second, such manifestation creates an opportunity for their followers to engage themselves in more virtuous practices such as releasing life and so on; third, many adversities as a result of sentient beings’ negative karma such as famine, plague can be successfully dispelled by a great bodhisattva’s sickness; fourth, sometimes bodhisattvas fall sick and undergo extreme suffering only to remove obstacles and hindrances that may happen in the future. This is commonly seen in the biographies of many Tibetan masters. In the past, some great masters got very sick and the pain and agony made them scream themselves hoarse. But after that many demonic interference and obstacles were dispelled.

Therefore, we should bear in mind that bodhisattvas’ illness is a manifestation of their great compassion. When His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche traveled abroad, he used to have a hard time to fall asleep and sometimes he also had stomach problems, so he would take sleeping pills and gastropine pills from time to time. At that time, Khenpo Sodargye was accompanying with him, so he wondered why His Holiness took so many medicine pills and did not care about their side effects at all. But it is now clear to Khenpo that there’re certainly many hidden intentions in doing so.

So it is important for us to recall the above points when we see some great masters falling sick. Bodhisattvas not only become ill for sentient beings but are also willing to go to hell for the benefit of sentient beings. *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* says that,

The Bodhisattva-mahasattva does no action that will gain him hell.

For the sake of beings, he takes a great vow and gains life in hell.

Great bodhisattvas have no karma that causes them to be born in hell. But because of their compassion and through the power of their vows they take rebirth in hell to liberate sentient beings there. Similarly, they have no such karma to cause them to get sick like ordinary beings, but they would appear to be so out of their great compassion and aspiration.

For us ordinary beings, we do need to have a proper attitude towards sickness. No one can escape from sickness and death. This is governed by the karmic law so we should not blame anyone else. As Geshe Potowa once said,

*People who succumb to illness are exactly those who should be ill,
And people who died are those who should die.*

With a right view of the karmic law, good practitioners will remain calm when some bad things happen, or even with the notice of critical illness. Hence we should practice these precious teachings and prepare for such situations in advance.

Of course, we respect life. Do not misinterpret Geshe Potowa's teaching and regard life as something worthless that can be destroyed at will. It would be a terrible mistake if someone quotes this saying and refuses to help a sick person. Some practitioners are very negative in thinking that nothing in this world is worthy, whenever to die is good for themselves and they'd better to die. Such an attitude of life is another extreme.

Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* says,

*Although the body is seen like a foe,
Nevertheless, it should be protected.
By long sustaining a disciplined one
Great merit is created.*

So as practitioners of good deeds and upholders of vows, we'd better maintain our good health by means of medical treatment, regimens, physical exercise, nutritious supplements, mantra-chantings, the blessing of Amitayus Buddha, etc. Particularly, through making full prostrations, eating and sleeping regularly, speaking and behaving gently, and most importantly, keeping a peaceful mind, we can certainly achieve longevity. This is a very good pith instruction to live a good life for Dharma practice.

Why Empty?

Manjushri asked Vimalakirti three more questions: “Why is your room empty? Why do you have no servants? What exactly is your illness?” The following text talks about these three questions.

Manjushri said, “Retired scholar, why is this room empty, with no servants?”

Vimalakirti said, “The countries of the buddhas are also all empty.”

[Manjushri] asked, “With what was it emptied?”

[Vimalakirti] answered, “It was emptied with emptiness.”

Given the first question as to why the room was empty, Vimalakirti answered that, not only was his room empty but so too were all buddha fields, realms of sentient beings, all buddhas and sentient beings.

When it comes to the connotation of emptiness, somehow the word “emptiness” in Chinese or in English cannot accurately convey its real meaning, making people misunderstand that emptiness means an empty state after a certain thing is gone. Some western scholars have long mistaken emptiness as nihilism or voidness; while some Chinese try to explain emptiness according to the literal meaning of this Chinese character. For example, emptiness can be imagined that after one takes away something inside a hole, then that hole is empty; or a person digs out an empty hole for living, which is nothing inside but still a real entity.

In the Tibetan language, the word for emptiness is called *tongpa nyid*, which captures the true meaning of emptiness, i.e., the absence of inherent existence in all phenomena. Speaking of the nature of all phenomena, it is free from permanence and non-existence. There are two levels of emptiness, the relative level and the ultimate level. The relative level of emptiness can be called non-existence, meaning that any phenomenon does not possess a solid and permanent existence as it appears to have. Furthermore, the ultimate level of emptiness tells us that even the so-called non-existence lacks a true entity, but is just a conceptual idea based on the concept of existence.

That’s why Vimalakirti answered that it was emptied by its own nature of emptiness when Manjushri asked with what it was emptied. For example, why is this material world empty? It

is empty because of the very nature of emptiness. It is empty by itself and does not need anything else to make it empty.

[Manjushri] asked further, “How can emptiness use emptiness?”

[Vimalakirti] answered, “It is empty through nondiscriminating emptiness.”

[Manjushri] asked further, “Can emptiness be discriminated?”

[Vimalakirti] answered, “Discrimination is also empty.”

Further, Manjushri asked, if the world is already empty by its nature, then why do you need to empty it? Or how can such emptiness be perceived? Vimalakirti answered such emptiness can be only perceived through the enlightened beings’ non-discriminating wisdom, rather than sensory faculties of the ordinaries. *The King of Samadhi* says,

The eyes, the ears, and the nose are unreliable.

The tongue, the body, and the mind are unreliable.

If the senses could be relied upon,

What need would there be for the path of the noble ones?

If the sensory faculties of ordinary beings are means of valid cognition, then what is the point of following the path of liberation that has been travelled by the enlightened ones? The path of liberation can only be guided by those enlightened noble ones. And only by following the path of liberation, can one eventually achieve the wisdom of non-discrimination and perceive emptiness.

Manjushri then asked about the nature of the wisdom of emptiness. Since it perceives the empty nature of all phenomena, can such wisdom of emptiness be discriminated or not. Vimalakirti then answered that the nature of discrimination is also empty. Basically, if it is not empty, then no phenomena can be established. And because all phenomena that can be perceived as empty, the wisdom that can perceive all phenomena is also empty.

More detailed analyses on this topic can be found in the *Wisdom Chapter* of *The Way of the Bodhisattva* and *The Root Stanza on the Middle Way*. The teachings of emptiness and the non-discriminating wisdom can only be understood and further realized by relying on the explanation of lineage masters and the reasoning and arguments from Madhyamika.

[Manjushri] asked further, “Where should emptiness be sought?”

[Vimalakirti] answered, “It should be sought within the sixty-two [heterodox] views.”

[Manjushri] asked further, “Where should the sixty-two views be sought?”

[Vimalakirti] answered, “They should be sought within the emancipation of the buddhas.”

[Manjushri] asked further, “Where should the emancipation of the buddhas be sought?”

[Vimalakirti] answered, “It should be sought within the mental processes of all sentient beings.”

Now, Manjushri’s question switched to searching for the non-discriminating wisdom of emptiness. How can one achieve the wisdom of emptiness that perceives the ultimate truth of all phenomena? Manjushri begins his questions from why the room was empty to how to realize emptiness. We can see that Manjushri is quite good at asking questions. Indeed, only with the right question can we get the right answer. Sometimes it is even harder to bring about the right question than answering it.

Vimalakirti said that one needs to rely on the sixty-two wrong views to realize the wisdom of emptiness. There are different explanations on the sixty-two wrong views in the sutras. For example, according to the *Nirvana Sutra*, there are 4 wrong views related to the view of self for each of the five aggregates in the desire realm and form realm, and the same goes to the formless realm which only has the four aggregates, so there are a total of 56 wrong views related to the view of self. Then, plus the 2 views of nihilism and eternalism in each of the three realms and we have 62 wrong views in total. The 4 wrong views mentioned above are the view of existence, the view of non-existence, the view of both existence and non-existence, and the view of neither existence nor non-existence.

Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom states that the five aggregates have 3 subdivisions: five aggregates of the past, five aggregates of the present and five aggregates of the future; and people have 4 wrong views regarding each aggregate, so in total there are 60 wrong views. Then plus the 2 views of nihilism and eternalism, we have 62 wrong views in total. The 4 wrong views mentioned above are the view of permanence, the view of non-

permanence, the view of both permanence and non- permanence, and the view of neither permanence nor non- permanence.

Here Vimalakirti told us that we should seek the wisdom of emptiness within these wrong views, kind of similar to the teaching that enlightenment is none other than mental afflictions. Never should we think that after abandoning all the wrong views, we would find the right view. In fact, the wrong view and the right view are dependent on each other and share the same nature of emptiness, so the right view can only be sought within the wrong view.

Furthermore, the sixty-two wrong views should be sought within the buddhas' emancipation, which in turn can be found in the mental processes of each and every sentient being. That is because sentient beings are all bound by various wrong views and mental afflictions, so they do need to seek liberation from their bondage. But speaking of the true reality, liberation and bondage share the same nature of emptiness. So if we realize the empty nature of our minds and mental activity, then there's no bondage anymore and that's the state of emancipation.

The teachings above could be abstruse and not easy to understand for beginners, it is still the best if we can gain some understanding from these teachings. Sometimes when explaining the ultimate truth, we may say that the ultimate view of the Middle Way is just within the mundane world, or the Buddha's teachings are never separated from worldly issues. Here we have similar teaching, the wisdom of emptiness is not apart from the wrong views and the emancipation of all buddhas relies on sentient beings' mental activity.

“Also, regarding your question about why there are no servants?” —all the host of Maras and [followers of] the heterodox paths are all my servants. Why? The host of Maras take pleasure in samsara, and the bodhisattvas do not forsake samsara. Those of the heterodox paths take pleasure in the views, and bodhisattvas are unmoved by the views.”

Now, regarding Manjushri's second question as to why there are no servants in the room, Vimalakirti answered that all Maras and heretics are his servants.

Why are all the host of Maras Vimalakirti's attendants? The host of Maras take pleasure in the realm of birth and death, and they'd like to create obstacles to spiritual practitioners and trap all living beings in samsara, which is their favorite job. Bodhisattvas, on the other hand, would never forsake samsara, and will always stay in samsara to enlighten and liberate all

living beings from birth and death. So Maras and bodhisattvas resemble each other in the way that they all stay in samsara, although with different purposes.

Why are those of the heterodox paths Vimalakirti's attendants? Heretics are very fond of the sixty-two wrong views while bodhisattvas do not abandon those wrong views but are not unaffected by them. So bodhisattvas can make those heretics as their servants.

Master Sengzhao explained that Maras are attracted by five sensory pleasures and are bound in the samsara of birth and death. Heretics seek for liberations but are bound by their wrong views, and so they are also not free from birth and death. Bodhisattvas regard samsara the same with nirvana, so they would never abandon samsara. Also, they regard wrong views with the same nature of right views, so they are unmoved by wrong views. In this way, they can make friends with Maras and heretics and ask them to be their attendants.

Khenpo here commented that as Buddhists, we should not stay away from those non-Buddhists nor demons, and instead, we should learn how to get along with them. If our correct views are stable and firm enough, then there is no need to worry about being affected by wrong views. Rather, we should stay in harmony with people of various background and make friends with them. A good Mahayana practitioner should be tolerant with people of different characters, and also remain unaffected by any of their negative thoughts and habits.

Manjushri said, "Retired scholar, what characteristics does your illness have?"

Vimalakirti said, "My illness is without form, invisible."

The following text is about the last question, the third one, on what exactly Vimalakirti's illness was? It contains three questions regarding the characteristics, the location as well as the elements of his illness. Manjushri first asked, "What characteristics does your illness have?" Or, "What form does it take?" Vimalakirti answered, "My illness has no form, and it cannot be seen."

Vimalakirti's illness is due to sentient beings' illness, so the cause of his illness was his great compassion. His compassion can extend unconditionally to every living being and manifest as being sick while he himself would never get sick. Therefore, his illness takes no form and is invisible. As Master Sengzhao commented, "The great compassion is unconditioned, then it is without form." The various manifestations are all within his great compassion that is

pervasive and universal, therefore, his illness does not take any specific form. Actually, not only is Vimalakirti's illness formless, so is everyone's illness. It is true that we feel pain in our body but we cannot really see or touch the pain. Illness is actually formless and invisible.

[Manjushri] asked further, "Is this an illness of body or of mind?"

[Vimalakirti] said, "It is not of the body, since the body transcends characteristics. Nor is it of the mind, since the mind is like a phantasm."

Manjushri then asked further, "Where's your illness? Is it in your body or in your mind?" Illness can be divided into physical and mental illness. For example in the 21st century, there are more and more types of mental illness. Vimalakirti denied both. His illness was not physically within the body, because the body transcends characteristics. His illness was not mentally within the mind, because the mind is like a dream or illusion.

When analyzing the physical body, we know that the body is empty in nature and beyond the extremes of existence or non-existence. On a gross level, it is an aggregation made up of numerous particles; on a subtle level, even those particles do not possess any solid existence. Thus the body is just an illusory appearance, so how can illness exist in it? Likewise, the mind does not truly exist, so how then can illness be seated in the mind?

We can also observe and analyze our sickness. Is our sickness in our body or in our mind? If it is in the mind, the mind is unattainable, as the *Diamond Sutra* says, "It is impossible to retain the past mind, impossible to hold on to the present mind, and impossible to grasp the future mind." If it is in the body, we can examine our body by splitting it into the smallest particles and eventually end up with nothing. This being said, understanding this theory alone does not mean we are strong enough to put it into actual practice, just like the story about Channa, who knew everything was empty still committed suicide because his pain was unendurable.

The same goes for mental afflictions. For example, if we investigate the nature of anger, we know it does not exist. However, when people get angry, they just explode and cannot control themselves. If we can steadily practice the teaching of emptiness over a long term, we will be able to handle emotions and sickness skillfully and easily.

[Manjushri] asked further, “Of the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air, to which element does this illness belong?”

[Vimalakirti] answered, “This illness is not of the earth element, but neither does it transcend the earth element. The water, fire, and wind elements are likewise. However, the illnesses of sentient beings arise from the four elements, and because they are ill I am ill.”

Manjushri then asked to which element his illness belong. Vimalakirti stated, “Unlike the illnesses of sentient beings, my illness does not belong to any of the four great elements, and it also does not transcend any of them. It is simply because sentient beings are ill that I am ill.”

Relatively speaking, sentient beings’ bodies consist of four great elements, from which illness arises. As *The Buddha Speaks of the Five Kings Sutra* says,

The disorder of one primary element of the body

Leads to one hundred and one kinds of diseases.

The disorder of the four primary elements of the body

Result in four hundred and four kinds of diseases.

But through rigorous observation, we cannot find any solid entity of four elements, let alone illness or anything else that arises from them. Therefore, on the ultimate level, illness does not truly exist.

How to Comfort a Bodhisattva Who is Ill?

At that time Manjushri asked Vimalakirti, “How should bodhisattvas comfort bodhisattvas who are ill?”

As the story goes, Vimalakirti was sick and Manjushri went over to his place. The visitor, Manjushri, was supposed to comfort the patient Vimalakirti. But Manjushri turned the tables and asked Vimalakirti instead, “How should bodhisattvas comfort bodhisattvas who are ill?”

Masters in the past offered various explanations on the preceding passage. Most of them believed that Vimalakirti, having personally experienced the pain of illness, was ideally suited to tell how best to console patients, a task healthy individuals may not be as fitting. In addition, in the ultimate sense, Vimalakirti was never ill, he merely appeared to be so.

Manjushri clearly understood this so he asked Vimalakirti deliberately. Otherwise, it would be callous to quiz patients in this way.

Vimalakirti said, “Explain that the body is impermanent but do not teach that one should have aversion for one’s body. Explain that the body suffers but do not teach that one should take pleasure in nirvana. Explain that the body is without self but teach that one should guide sentient beings anyway. Explain that the body is empty serene but do not teach that it is ultimately extinguished.”

Vimalakirti replied that when comforting patients with physical illness, it’s better to let them know: “There is no need to cling to the body, since it changes from moment to moment.” Indeed, the Shravakayana always emphasizes the impermanent nature of the physical body. But it’s not enough to stop here. Dwelling on impermanence alone may cause patients to become disillusioned about their bodies and give up the will to live. Thus Vimalakirti added more, “Do not teach that one should have aversion for one’s body.” That is, do not tell them to loathe or turn away from the body, since this composite body is still a useful tool to accomplish the deeds of benefiting sentient beings. By taking this caution, one will not fall into extremes.

Therefore, to comfort someone who is sick, we should, on the one hand, acknowledge the fragility of the human body and on the other hand, wish them a speedy recovery and live on for many more years on the other hand. Otherwise, patients may take after some Shravaka monks who, becoming dejected about the defect of the physical body, chose not to live on and entered into nirvana.

Impermanence and suffering are a package deal. The impermanence of the body is sure to be followed by the suffering of change, suffering upon suffering, and the all-pervasive suffering. Hence, the very nature of the physical body is suffering. Shravakas believe that by entering into a peaceful nirvana, suffering will end. However, by doing so, one will lose the opportunity to benefit others. Hence Vimalakirti said that we should let patients be aware of the sufferings of the body, and meanwhile not take pleasure in nirvana. So we should comfort patients by saying that even though the body is miserable, it is not without merit, because by experiencing suffering, one can easily empathize with another’s pain and offer help.

We also need to tell patients that the body is without self. If we analyze the body parts of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, head, or feet, we won’t be able to find any truly existing entity; thus,

the body is said to be “selfless”. However, although there is no such a substantial self, this body still appears. Thus to this body, we should harbor no attachment, but abide in a dreamlike or illusory state to benefit living beings. Many people have not comprehended the teaching of selflessness and as a result, suffer a lot. Therefore, we should comfort patients that in spite of the fact the body is without self in the absolute sense, one should still live in this world in an illusory manner and guide living beings by giving them the Dharma teaching.

Further, we should explain to patients the emptiness of the body. That is, through a stage-by-stage process, the various parts of the body can be dissected into smaller and smaller particles, until the subtlest indivisible particles, which also disintegrate into emptiness. However, such “emptiness” is not a vacuum devoid of any quality, or an ultimately extinguished state. Therefore, as Vimalakirti said, we should not speak of ultimate extinction, because it will lead us to end in the cessation of perception.

In Buddhism, the teachings on the physical body are generally approached from these four aspects: impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and selflessness. On top of the general teaching, Vimalakirti further focused on dissuading patients from entering into nirvana or submitting to the cessation of perception. Why was the same topic expounded from various angles? According to Kumarajiva, it is for the purpose of catering to the different capacities of sentient beings. For some people, they need to hear about the impermanence of the body; for others, the suffering of the body may strike a chord; while other people feel that the selflessness of the body makes sense; still others want to know why the body is empty. These different ways of delivery are designed to make different beings understand the true reality. If one set of explanations fails to make the point, then try another one or draw inferences from analogies. Eventually, the realization will dawn in them.

Lecture 28

Weather Related and Other Issues at Larung Gar

Before the teaching, Khenpo addressed a few weather issues at Larung Gar. Firstly, when this lecture was given, the temperature had nosedived 10 °C over two days, and it went down to minus 20 °C. Worse, there has been a power outage affecting many parts of Larung Gar. Power failures are not uncommon at Larung Gar, and Khenpo actually has fond memories of surviving the total pitch darkness in candlelight during the early years. Khenpo hopes the power will be restored soon, starting from the central working area. He also advises everyone to bundle up well to brave the tough conditions.

Secondly, as the temperature goes down, so seems the quality of food in the cafeterias is not that good. For instance, some dishes have been found to be undercooked and barely edible. Khenpo appreciates the challenging task that the volunteer cooks face, especially when they have to get up before dawn to prepare breakfast. But at the same time, he hopes those on duty will always take food quality seriously while also taking pride and joy in serving all the Sangha members.

Thirdly, Khenpo points out the absurdity of hunting for so-called relics on the grounds during the recent puja. Granted, many relics had spontaneously appeared at Larung Gar previously, especially during His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche's time that Khenpo himself had witnessed. But Khenpo guarantees that those coarse grains or plastic-like pebbles that people are searching for now are not the real thing. So it is better not to misidentify relics, fooling oneself or even bringing shame to Larung Gar.

Fourthly, Khenpo would like to define explicitly the responsibilities and scope of Dharma teachers and tutors at Larung Gar. It should be clear to everyone, whether monastics or lay practitioners, that our highest priority is the study, contemplation, and meditation of the Dharma, to which Dharma teachers and tutors are meant to provide guidance. However, while assuming such a supervisory role, one may be tempted to regard it as one's own space. Some Dharma teachers have organized trips for students under their care to go on "tours" or "empowerments" at home or abroad. Khenpo considers these improvised activities inappropriate and unauthorized, not to mention a grave safety risk that the organizers must shoulder.

For Khenpo himself, in his over thirty-year career as a Khenpo at Larung Gar, there has only been two occasions when he led his students on external events: one being a pilgrimage to Mount Wu Tai in 2017 with a few key volunteers; the other being to attend an empowerment bestowed by Khenpo Depa, for which he had requested and obtained prior permission from His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. Even on the home ground, such as circumambulating the sacred eastern peak or western peak of Larung Valley, he has never taken off more than a day away. So anyone in a supervisory or volunteering role must discern clearly what areas in your work you have the authority to oversee or take actions; after all, nowadays it is prudent to steer away from extravagant displays, and we all need to observe appropriate boundaries.

Moreover, the present international situation is complex with turbulent changes in social, financial, political, environmental, and religious arenas. We as Buddhists, besides attending the Dharma, also need to be aware of current affairs. Unless we can afford to live an utterly solitary life in remote places, we all have to interact with the world and handle various problems in our daily lives. Khenpo keeps himself informed at a distance and he has witnessed major shifts in the operation of Buddhism and other faiths in today's world. He warns that even as we are sitting here studying the Dharma now, there's no guarantee if a next class will happen, so we should treasure every single bit of our connection with the teachings. It's best we keep a low profile and deepen our understanding steadfastly.

The Benefit of Hearing the Dharma

The Ghanta Sutra exalts the merit of listening to Dharma teachings:

To gather the Sangha to attend a Dharma teaching,

The ghanta (ritual bell) and drum are being played.

By merely hearing the sound, one can attain liberation,

Let alone the merit accumulated by listening to Dharma teachings.

In Tibetan monasteries, it is customary to blow a conch or beat a drum before pujas or Dharma teachings to call everyone's attention. By simply hearing these sounds, one will attain liberation and be spared from falling into the lower realms. How much more benefit is there if one actually goes to listen to the Dharma?!

In addition, if one goes to the lecture hall, or simply takes seven steps in that direction, one accrues enormous merits. Many sutras clearly explicate this point, and our guru Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often quoted them.

When Khenpo first arrived at Larung Gar, he often had to walk a long distance to attend the Dharma teaching, yet he was filled with a sheer joy that has stayed fresh with him until today. Nowadays it is also common for people at Larung Gar to slide and fall on the icy roads in winter when attending morning classes, but we have to overcome various difficulties for the sake of the Dharma.

For class participants in the city, Khenpo assures them that every minute they spend on attending Dharma classes or related activities is meaningful, whether it's driving, riding buses, or walking to the classes. Of course, it helps to remember the above scriptural citation as well.

At Larung Gar, the sound of a conch is heard before a Dharma class. Khenpo envisions a similar audio cue in the future for online courses that will serve as an alert: "The teaching is about to start right now!" Hearing the sound of a conch is auspicious not only for humans, but also for other beings such as crows, sparrows, or magpies living in the Larung Valley. This is illustrated by a story of the influential Buddhist scholar Vasubandhu, who used to recite the *Collection of a Hundred Thousand Slokas in Ninety-Nine Sections* every day. A pigeon, sitting on his roof above, was able to hear Vasubandhu's reciting. After the pigeon died, it was reborn as human and turned out to be a learned monk named Acharya Sthiramati. Khenpo also tries to make some connections to the crows that nest under the eaves of his house. Whenever Khenpo walks by, he chants mantras audibly, and those crows all stare at Khenpo attentively as if listening. They don't seem to be afraid of Khenpo, but perhaps a little disrespectful as they are positioned at a higher level than Khenpo, the teacher, to receiving the teaching.

How to Comfort the Bodhisattva Who is Ill?

At that time Manjushri asked Vimalakirti², “How should bodhisattvas comfort bodhisattvas who are ill?”

As the story goes, Vimalakirti was sick and Manjushri went over to his place. The visitor, Manjushri, was supposed to comfort the patient Vimalakirti. But Manjushri turned the tables and asked Vimalakirti instead, “How should bodhisattvas comfort bodhisattvas who are ill?”

Masters in the past offered various explanations on the preceding passage. Most of them believed that Vimalakirti, having personally experienced the pain of illness, was ideally suited to tell how best to console patients, a task healthy individuals may not be as fitting. In addition, in the ultimate sense, Vimalakirti was never ill, he merely appeared to be so. Manjushri clearly understood this so he asked Vimalakirti deliberately. Otherwise, it would be callous to quiz patients in this way.

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Vimalakirti replied that when comforting patients with physical illness, it’s better to let them know: “There is no need to cling to the body, since it changes from moment to moment.” Indeed, the Shrivakayana teaching always emphasizes the impermanent nature of the physical body. But it’s not enough to stop here. Dwelling on impermanence alone may cause patients to become disillusioned about their bodies and give up the will to live. Thus Vimalakirti added more, “Do not teach that one should have aversion for one’s body.” That is, do not tell them to loathe or turn away from the body, since this composite body is still a useful tool to accomplish the deeds of benefiting sentient beings. By taking this caution, one will not fall into extremes.

Therefore, to comfort someone who is sick, we should on the one hand acknowledge the fragility of the human body, and on the other hand wish them a speedy recovery and that they

² However, in Xuanzang’s translation, this question was asked by Vimalakirti to Manjushri. So this could be an issue of different Sanskrit versions.

live on for many more years. Otherwise, patients may take after some Shravaka monks who, becoming dejected about the defect of the physical body, chose not to live on and entered into nirvana.

Impermanence and suffering are a package deal. The impermanence of the body is sure to be followed by the suffering of change, suffering upon suffering, and the all-pervasive suffering. Hence, the very nature of the physical body is suffering. Shravakas believe that by entering into a peaceful nirvana, suffering will end. However, by doing so, one will lose the opportunity to benefit others. Hence Vimalakirti said that we should let patients be aware of the sufferings of the body, and meanwhile not take pleasure in nirvana, Hinayana's nirvana in particular. So we should comfort patients by saying that even though the body is miserable, it is not without merit, because remaining in this physical body and staying in this world, one can easily empathize with others' pain and directly help others.

We also need to tell patients that the body is without self. If we analyze the body parts of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, head, or feet, we won't be able to find any truly existing entity; thus, the body is said to be "selfless". However, although there is no such a substantial self, this body still appears and we shouldn't abandon it by entering nirvana. Thus to this body, we shouldn't harbor any attachment, and abide in it in a dreamlike or illusory manner to benefit living beings. Many people have not comprehended the teaching of selflessness and as a result, suffer a lot. Therefore, we should comfort patients that, in spite of the fact that the body is without self in the absolute sense, one should still live in this world in an illusory manner and guide living beings by giving them the Dharma teaching.

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“Explain that one should regret one’s former transgressions but do not teach that they enter into the past.

Above are the comforting words in regards to the body, and Vimalakirti continued from the aspect of the mind. First of all, we should tell patients a proper attitude towards negative karma. In principle, transgressions or obscuration are posited on the basis of one’s mind. It is dependent on causes—negative actions committed in past lives—that their consequent effects of suffering in this life arise. For example, having killed in previous lives will make one’s present life short, or having harmed others in previous lives will make one subject to frequent diseases in the present life. However, negative karma cannot be deemed as being truly existing that transmigrates to our present body, in that case, karma would become real and not empty. If negative karmas were not empty, they would remain unchanging, incapable of giving rise to painful results or being cleansed by repentance. Therefore, Vimalakirti taught that sick bodhisattvas should regret their former transgressions, and at the same time, they should not “enter into the past”, that is, do not hold past actions as solid and perpetually immutable.

Comfort the illness of others with one’s own illness. One should recognize the innumerable *kalpas* of suffering of one’s past lives.

Vimalakirti continued: “Tell sick bodhisattvas to use their own illnesses as a catalyst for sympathizing with others with similar illnesses, and also recognize that throughout the countless kalpas of past existence, they have always been haunted by the suffering of illness.”

This is an instruction based on the practice of compassion. Due to the negative karmas accumulated in past lives, it is inevitable that numerous sentient beings succumb to illness, be it the sentient beings in the past, present, or future. In fact, we all have suffered a lot in the three lower realms in the past and are still suffering now as human beings. Thus when sick

bodhisattvas are experiencing their own suffering, they have every reason to arouse compassion for beings in the three lower realms.

The pain and suffering in the three lower realms are most excruciating and unbearable. As the *Sutra of the Past Vows of Earth Store Bodhisattva* says: “Due to their karma, the offenders undergo hundreds of thousands of deaths and rebirths. They pass through hundreds of millions of eons seeking escape in vain.”

So sick bodhisattvas should use their own illness as a means of sympathizing with the illness of others. Having suffered grave illnesses themselves, today many celebrities in politics, art, or entertainment have started charitable activities or turned to Buddhism to help fellow patients with similar ailments. Healthy people cannot relate well with the agonies of those who fall ill, but people who have gone through the ordeals of an illness do not have problems to understand the pain of another’s debilitating disease.

As Khenpo mentioned about his own experience, a while ago his foot hurt badly during one of his trips abroad, and he had to walk with a limp through the airport. Later his foot was a little better and he saw another person, also in an airport, in a similar predicament. Khenpo wished earnestly to help the man in any way he could since he knows exactly the pain and inconvenience the man must be enduring. So having experienced a situation similar to what others are suffering makes it easier for us to arouse empathetic concern for their plight. This is an expression of compassion.

One should be mindful of benefiting all sentient beings and remember one’s cultivation of blessings, be mindful of one’s pure livelihood without generating vexation but always generating exertion. Be the physician king, healing the host of illnesses.

Sick bodhisattvas should be encouraged to be mindful of bringing benefit to all living beings, not only in their hearts but also in action, especially toward those ravaged by illnesses. When we have some ability, we should try all our best to help those desperately in need. Such sort of help need not necessarily depend on an outside organization. Today scams in the name of charity are common, and doing good works may seem risky while committing evil is a breeze. We must, therefore, be careful about how we make charitable choices.

Sick bodhisattvas should also be reminded of recalling the merits they have accumulated in the past. Indeed, it is vital that patients learn to think of their merits that they cultivated

before, otherwise they may find themselves being occupied with negative thoughts and miserable experiences. In addition, visitors should comfort patients by guiding them to look on the bright side, saying something like, “Don’t be sad, you will get better soon. If not, you will at least be reborn into higher realms.”

There is a story in the *Madhyamagama Sutra*: Once upon a time, the great Buddhist patron Anathapindika became quite ill and he sent for his good friend Shariputra to visit him. Shariputra came and inquired after him with deep concern, “How are you feeling? Has your illness become any better now? How is your appetite?” Anathapindika replied, “I am quite ill and it’s not getting better at all.” Then Shariputra replied thoughtfully, “Anathapindika, you will recover soon. Even if you did not, you would never fall into the three lower realms, since you have done so many good deeds and accumulated tremendous merits. In addition, you have progressed superbly on the Dharma path, such as cultivating the right view, leading the right livelihood, performing the right action, and many others.” Hearing this, Anathapindika felt reassured and realized that indeed he had nothing to worry about even would he die. With this new insight, his spirit was lifted immediately and his symptoms were cured. He jumped off his sickbed and walked around with much relief.

So it is very appropriate for visitors to show regard in this fashion because all patients worry about their own illness and yearn for kind words. By asking these questions, visitors and patients find common ground in communicating. If visitors merely left some money and took leave without saying anything to patients, it would be very rude indeed.

Sick bodhisattvas should be told to concentrate on a life of purity that does not give way to sensual indulgences and also avoids any wrong livelihood which would harm other beings. Many spiritual practitioners have strived meticulously to lead a pure livelihood. In the biography of Master Huiyuan there is a story on how he upheld his Pratimoksha vows in his last moments. When he was dying from illness, doctors recommended taking a medicinal liquor and meat soup, which the master flatly refused. The doctor next suggested millet soup, again the master refused directly. Then the doctor suggested honey water, but the master wanted to know if sipping honey water would constitute precept transgression. While his attendant was looking it up, Master Huiyuan passed away, at the age of around 83.

Thus, it’s important for sick bodhisattvas to exercise the same caution. However, when the illness is quite serious, patients may try certain medicines on the premise that no root precept

is violated. For instance, this medicine was not acquired by killing for the sake of the patient *per se*, and that the killing was not committed on the pretext of illness; moreover, this treatment may turn out to be effective. If these conditions are met, taking this medicine is allowable.

Sick bodhisattvas should not give way to gloom or worry. Sick bodhisattvas should not indulge in thinking “I will never recover, I am really doomed!” In today’s society, the high cost of health care is also a weighty concern. Besides a few countries that provide health care for all, in many parts of the world people have been forced into bankruptcy because of sickness and lack of health insurance. Regardless, we should reckon that a peaceful and relaxed mindset favors the odds of recovery from illness, and a foul mood can only worsen its outcome. Thus, it pays to maintain a positive outlook.

Furthermore, visitors should persuade sick bodhisattvas to cultivate constant diligence in the practice of Dharma. To carry out virtuous deeds even when they are ill, this very act will facilitate their recovery. Also, encourage sick bodhisattvas to make great aspirations, which is an essential practice for them. For example, vow to become the physician king like the Buddha who cures all mental and physical illnesses of sentient beings.

Thus should bodhisattvas comfort bodhisattvas who are ill, making them happy.”

This is how bodhisattvas should visit and comfort other bodhisattvas who are ill, so as to make them feel happy. With a joyful mind, the disease will subside by itself without treatment. So when we call on patients, we’d better speak of pleasant topics that bring sunshine to them. When knotty issues buried deep in the heart are resolved, many patients will experience a spontaneous cure. During this procedure, we will also experience great joy.

Besides, to those having genuine altruism, illness is never a big deal. Khenpo shares his personal experiences on this: When he falls ill, if he arouses even a bit of altruistic intention—say, to translate, to give teachings, and to assume other tasks—his tenacious hold onto his own illness collapses and he feels relieved immediately. On the contrary, should he constantly worry about himself, conjuring up all sorts of doomed scenarios that make him sad and sullen, he would accomplish nothing. Therefore, altruism is the driving force that propels one into many worthy endeavors.

Again, Khenpo emphasized that all Dharma teachers should be motivated by an altruistic intention and always teach the Dharma enthusiastically. If enthusiasm is not in sight yet, then strive to arouse altruism, with which passion is bound to ensue. For example, when noticing certain students are falling behind, if a teacher resolves to change the students' status for the better, then a great store of energy will manifest naturally to that teacher.

At some point, monastics from a Buddhist institute will find themselves living in a monastery new to them. It is best to firmly believe at the outset that this monastery will be the place where they can bring great benefit to sentient beings. Having established an altruistic foundation, they will get along well with host members and subsequently make significant contributions with zeal. Otherwise, there would be impending disappointment and failure.

Some Buddhists today have become cynical and opinionated. Being restless and indifferent to the welfare of others, they can hardly be called Mahayana practitioners, let alone the doers of "healing the host of illnesses". Conversely, those suffused with altruism are unruffled by moderate illnesses; and if they are dying from a serious illness, they think nothing but sentient beings, which will greatly placate their own pain.

In short, bodhisattvas should try their best to comfort sick bodhisattvas and lighten their spirits. To patients who are Mahayana practitioners, remind them about the precious bodhichitta, the altruistic spirit of benefiting others.

Above is the teaching on how to comfort sick bodhisattvas and the next question is how sick bodhisattvas to tame their minds. According to Master Zhiyi, the first question is for those bodhisattvas of lesser capabilities who follow the teaching based on faith, and the second question is for those with sharper faculties who follow the teaching based on reason. So to answer the first question, Vimalakirti mainly addressed the practice of compassion. And to answer the second one, Vimalakirti directly explained the wisdom of emptiness, i.e., the imputation of self, the emptiness of phenomena, as well as the emptiness of emptiness itself, etc.

Indeed, both aspects touch upon the profound essence of Mahayana Buddhism. Everyone is susceptible to illness, and we'll also find ourselves as visitors or caretakers of someone who falls ill. At these moments, is there any guidance to follow? Vimalakirti's words provide practical advice for us, and whoever hears such Mahayana teachings will certainly incur immense blessings and merits.

How Should the Bodhisattva Who is Ill Control his Mind?

Manjushri said, “Retired scholar, how should the bodhisattva who is ill control his mind?”

Vimalakirti said, “The bodhisattva who is ill should think as follows:

“This present illness of mine comes entirely from the false concepts, confusions, and afflictions of previous lives. There is no actual *dharma* that experiences illness³.’

In replying Manjushri’s question, Vimalakirti said, a sick bodhisattva should think to himself: “My present illness comes entirely from my past afflictions, ignorance and deluded thoughts. None of them has any real existence, so how could there be a person who truly experiences illness?”

Vimalakirti first pointed out the causes of illness: Illnesses arise from false concepts and self-grasping, which can be boiled down to delusion and ignorance. To attain liberation from delusion and ignorance, one must rely on the power of realization, which entails a prior in-depth comprehension of the nature of phenomena. Armed with such comprehension and realization, a spiritual practitioner will no longer be enticed by samsara and become free from its ensuing suffering.

The Sutra of Unprecedented Causes and Conditions says,

The virtuous embrace death

Like prisoners who are to be released from prison;

While the evildoers fear death

Like criminals who are to be put into jail.

Adept practitioners embrace death calmly and joyfully, like prisoners at the threshold of being released; conversely, evildoers dread death, like criminals facing immediate incarceration. Hence without comprehending the true nature of phenomena, worldly people are ensnared in delusion and false concepts.

³ A proper translation should be **They have no real existence, so who is it who suffers illness?**

Shantideva's *The Way of the Bodhisattva* says,

Continua and gatherings, so-called,

Like garlands and like armies, are unreal.

So there is no one to experience pain

for who is there to be its "owner"?

Our sense of having a distinct self comes from our five aggregates and a continuum of existence. But Shantideva says that "aggregates" are just a gathering, like when many soldiers grouped together there is an "army". As for a continuum, it is nothing more than the coming together of many instants, like lots of beads strung into a string are identified a "mala". An army, a mala, or a garland are merely imputations or labels, having no independent existence of their own. If both continua and gatherings have no existence in themselves, how can there be a real person? Who is the experiencer or the owner of the pain?

So when we visit patients, we may cite the above teaching to console the sick: "Illness comes from false concepts, actually both the afflicting illness and afflicted patients are nonexistence, and there is no real experiencer who suffers at all." But indeed, this teaching is meant for those with sharp faculties or who follow the Dharma on the basis of reasoning. If the patients have learnt the doctrine of Middle Way or have attained certain realization in Vajrayana practice, they will be able to embrace suffering when prompted only slightly. As a matter of fact, the Vajrayana tradition emphasizes that when getting close to death, people who have practiced the tantric teaching can easily abide in the mind's absolute nature if someone gives them a simple reminder while on their deathbed.

"Why? 'Body' is a provisional name for a conglomeration of the four elements, and the four elements have no master.

"The body also has no self. Furthermore, the arising of this illness is entirely due to attachment to self. Therefore, one should not generate attachment regarding the self. You should understand that this is the foundation of illness and so eliminate the conception of 'self' and the conception of 'sentient being.'

Why is there no "experiencer" of suffering? This is because the body is the gathering of the four elements. When these elements of earth, water, fire, and wind are brought together, it's given a provisional name, a "body." Among these four elements, there is no master who

owns all the rest, nor is there a separate “I” residing within the body. However, the arising of illness is entirely due to the attachment to self, so we must eradicate the self-attachment.

In this way, the cause of illness is exposed, and one is able to eliminate the conception of self and sentient beings, attain the realization state of “no self, no person, no sentient beings, no life span”, as described in the *Diamond Sutra*.

As Shantideva says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

*If such a thing as “I” exists indeed,
Then terrors, granted, will torment it.
But since no self or “I” exists at all,
What is there left for fears to terrify?*

If there is a shred of “I” truly existing, then of course one will be fearful and worry about anything that might harm it. But when examined properly with the wisdom of the selflessness, the “I” grasped by all beings is nowhere to be found. If there is not even so much as a single atom’s truth of “I”, what is there left to terrify?

A story depicting such a stance is found in *Stories of Lineage Masters of Dharma Treasure* about Aryasimha (Venerable Lion), the twenty-fourth Indian Patriarch of the Zen School. In the sixth century, Aryasimha made a great success of preaching Buddhism in the country of Kashmir, to the extreme jealousy of two heretic leaders. Disguising themselves as monks, the two stealthily entered the king’s palace and fooled around at the imperial harem. When the scandal broke, many people lost their faith in Buddhism. The king was furious about Aryasimha, he found him and demanded: “Is it true that you have realized the emptiness of the five aggregates?”

“That is true,” answered the master.

The king again asked, “So are you beyond the limits of life and death?”

“Yes, I am,” replied the master.

The king said, “Since you have transcended life and death, give me your head!”

“This body is not my possession,” replied the master, “so why be stingy with its head?”

The master fearlessly exposed his neck; the king then wielded his sword and cut off the master's head. A white milky substance spurted out of his body to a height of several feet in the air. At that moment, the king's right arm immediately fell to the ground, and he was dead seven days later. This story exemplifies the ultimate truth as taught in Buddhism.

Like Aryasimha, today many eminent Buddhist masters have also realized the profound state of "no self" and "no sentient beings". It is a remarkable achievement, but they do not make a show in public, but just remain humble and ordinary. Conversely, there are also others who, under the sway of jealousy or arrogance, belittle Buddhist masters with all kinds of slander and rumor. In times like this, timid people lacking wisdom may take hearsay at face value. So Khenpo reminds everyone to discern the truth on both mundane and spiritual affairs, which is very important.

The above pertains to the selflessness of persons, the first layer of how to tame one's mind. The following is of the second layer, the thought of the dependent arising of phenomena.

"You should give rise to the conception of *dharmas*, thinking as follows: 'It is only through the combination of a host of *dharmas* that this body is created. Its arising is only the arising of *dharmas*, and its extinction is only the extinction of *dharmas*.' Also, 'these *dharmas* do not know themselves⁴. When they arise, they do not say "I have arisen." When they are extinguished, they do not say "I have become extinguished.""

Sick Bodhisattvas should call up the thought on phenomena, thinking to themselves, "It is only through the combination of blood, flesh, bones, various particles, and other things that the body is formed. When causes and conditions are met, all composite things—the four elements, the five aggregates, illness, and other myriad phenomena appear. Once the causes and conditions are exhausted, so will their corresponding phenomena vanish.

Under the observation of wisdom, all phenomena arise and fall without knowing each other. The four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, the five faculties of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, as well as limbs, molecules, dusts, and so on, do not know one another and have nothing to do among themselves. When they appear, they don't announce: "Here I come!" and when they vanish, they don't bother to say, "I am leaving!" All phenomena arise and

⁴ A better translation should be **these phenomena do not know one another**.

cease in accordance with the gathering and dispersing of their respective causes and conditions. As the teaching goes:

All phenomena arise from the gathering of causes and conditions

And cease with the dispersing of causes and conditions.

Thus, our bodies are no more than mere appearances coming about due to the interdependent arising of causes and conditions. If without this understanding, we will constantly grumble about our unhappy lot when facing the slightest illnesses—headache, poor appetite, flu, and whatever; or even become doubtful about the workings of causality—given that we’ve done many good deeds, why should we still be sick? These complaints are unfounded. When we genuinely penetrate the principle of dependent arising, all our fixations and clinging will dissipate.

Next is the third layer of this question, the extinction of all phenomena.

“The bodhisattva who is ill should undertake the conception (or: visualization) of the extinguished *dharmas*. He should think as follows, ‘This conception of the *dharmas* is also a confused [view]. Such a confused [view] is a great calamity, and I should transcend it.’ What should be transcended? One should transcend the self and [the sense of] personal possession. What is it to transcend the self and [the sense of] personal possession? It is to transcend the two *dharmas*. What is it to transcend the two *dharmas*? It is to be mindful neither of the interior nor exterior *dharmas* and to practice universal sameness. What is universal sameness? It is for self to be same and for nirvana to be same. Why? Both self and nirvana are empty. Why are they empty? They are merely names, and therefore empty. Thus these two *dharmas* are without definitive nature. When one attains universal sameness there is no remaining illness. There is only the illness of emptiness, and the illness of emptiness is also empty.

Sick bodhisattvas should further develop the thought of extinguishing all phenomena: “The conception of all phenomena, such as sickness, is also a form of deluded thinking, and this deluded thought itself is a great calamity. So I should remove it.” In Xuanzang’s version, there is one more sentence, “I should also rid all living beings of their great calamity.”

The following questions are interlocked with one another.

What to transcend? It is to transcend the conception of I and mine, i.e., self and the sense of personal possession.

How to transcend? It is to transcend the two notions of subject and object, or the internal and external phenomena. The internal phenomena refer to the six sense faculties, and the external phenomena refer to the six sense objects.

How to transcend these two notions? It is to not think of the internal or external phenomena, having no involvement with either the internal or the external entities. In the context of the six faculties and six sense objects, all phenomena are included, and we should treat all of them with equanimity. In Xuanzang's translation, no involvement is further elaborated as "no deviation, no distraction, and no discrimination".

How to practice universal sameness? It is to realize the sameness of everything from self to nirvana. That is, all phenomena are equal, and there is no slight difference between samsara and nirvana. As *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* says,

*There is no difference at all between
Samsara and Nirvana.*

*There is no difference at all between
Nirvana and Samsara.*

Why are all phenomena equal? Because all phenomena from self to nirvana are equally empty. Samsara is empty, and so is nirvana.

Why are they all empty? Because all phenomena in samsara and nirvana are merely fabricated names; besides designation and imputation, nothing has any intrinsic existence.

Thus if we have acquired universal sameness, then there is no illness remaining, except the illness of emptiness. Eventually, the "illness of emptiness" by itself does not exist because it is also empty.

We start from the statement that the deluded thought itself is a great calamity, now reach the conclusion that with the ultimate realization that emptiness and appearance are but one, no more sickness can ever afflict us. Such ultimate realization also entails that emptiness and bliss are but one, emptiness and clarity are but one, and so forth.

But if we consider all phenomena are utterly void, being an empty vacuity of nothingness, then we have succumbed to the deadly illness of emptiness, which, sadly, is beyond any cure. Only by seeing through authentically the emptiness of emptiness, can there be a complete recovery from illnesses. May everybody be free from physical or mental illness!

Lecture 29

A Few Words before the Teaching

Previously we've learned Vimalakirti's instructions for sick bodhisattvas of sharp and dull faculties respectively, on how to transform illness into spiritual practices. As the conversation between Manjushri and Vimalakirti is quite meaningful and practical for Dharma practitioners, Khenpo doesn't set a tight schedule but takes his time in explaining the text in great detail so that the listeners would have a thorough understanding of the teaching.

In recent years, a great number of Dharma practitioners in BSA focus on the study of the five major subjects of Mahayana teachings, i.e., *Discipline (Vinaya)*, *Phenomenology (Abhidharma)*, *Valid Cognition (Pramana)*, *Middle Way (Madhyamika)*, and *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita)*. Along the path of study, many people start to realize that in this degenerate time, as long as the authentic Dharma remains, the most meaningful thing in our lives is to study and comprehend the Mahayana teachings. This certainly requires perseverance and diligence. In fact, instead of one's intelligence, perseverance and diligence are the two most important qualities in achieving accomplishments in worldly affairs and spiritual practices.

As obstacles are unavoidable during our study and practice, there is no need to be timid or be scared of adversities. Khenpo himself, as well as His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, had encountered numerous obstacles when studying, practicing and spreading the Dharma. However, they persevered with their initial aspirations and overcame various difficulties, and their achievements are obvious to all. So Dharma practitioners are expected to be brave and persistent, and no matter what kind of difficulty we encounter, we should stay firm in the pursuit of the Dharma and continue our systematical study and practice as always. As a tantric stanza says, "Even through flaming infernos or seas of razor-sharp blades, search for the Dharma until you die."

This bravery and perseverance of seeking for the Dharma comes from the deep faith in the Three Jewels. Given that the merit accumulated by listening to the Dharma is unfathomable, if we have no faith in the Dharma, we can barely get any real benefits from the blessings of the teacher or the sublime Dharma. *The Sutra of the Heap of Jewels* says,

*Those holding no faith [in the Three Jewels],
Cultivate no pure virtues,
Just like the burnt seed
Never takes root and sprouts.*

Thus, those who have no faith receive no blessing. Jetsun Rangrik Repa says,

*Wishing for primal wisdom beyond the intellect to dawn
Without fervent trust in the teacher
Is like waiting for sunshine in a north-facing cave.
That way, appearances and mind will never merge.*

Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava also says,

*The faith of total trust allows blessings to enter you.
When the mind is free of doubt, whatever you wish can be achieved.*

So faith is the key and whoever has it will receive all the blessings from the Three Jewels and the guru. Moreover, if one can eradicate all the doubts by studying and reflecting on the Dharma, one's Dharma practices will certainly come to fruition without any hindrance. Therefore, systematic studying and contemplating the Dharma teachings such as the Buddhist Logic and the Middle Way are crucial for all Dharma practitioners, and through this way we are able to make progress gradually. Otherwise, we may find ourselves not getting anywhere after years of taking refuge in the Three Jewels. Taking the study of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* for instance, because it is such a supreme sutra imbued with the Mahayana spirit, we may not obtain an obvious state of realization over one lecture, but in the long run we will gradually accumulate merit and perfect our wisdom and finally become a virtuous person who is able to tame all mental afflictions.

How Should the Bodhisattva Who is Ill Control his Mind?

“Bodhisattvas who are ill should use nonexperience to experience the experiences. They acquire realization without becoming complete in the *dharmas* of buddhahood and without extinguishing experience⁵.

As we know, the five aggregates compose our mental and physical body. Here “experiences” refer to the aggregate of sensation, which has the three types of pleasure, pain and neutral sensation. When ordinary people fall sick, they will feel pain, but how do bodhisattvas experience illness? They experience illness with nonexperience. In other words, they have no sensations of pain or pleasure since they have realized that all illnesses are empty in nature; yet they allow themselves to feel such sensations for the sake of sentient beings, so they appear to suffer from sickness.

Therefore, bodhisattvas would not cultivate absorption of cessation and enter nirvana unless they reach the unsurpassable perfect awakening. Master Sengzhao commented that “without becoming complete in the Buddhadharma and without liberating all sentient beings, bodhisattvas seek no extinguishment of pleasurable, painful and neutral feelings as a preliminary to nirvana”. Unlike shravakas or pratyekabuddha who would acquire the realization of cessation and enter into nirvana, bodhisattvas, although they are capable of doing so, would rather perfectly grasp all the Dharma teachings preached by the Buddha and benefit all sentient beings before they are ready to enter into nirvana.

We should follow bodhisattvas’ examples and do not find various excuses to give up our Dharma study and practice. When we encounter some difficult situations, for example, having poor health or being tired out doing too many things, we’d better stay strong and not try to escape from or directly give up the precious opportunities of benefiting oneself and others. Although one may enjoy a leisure life after choosing to enter a worldly “absorption of cessation”, this is considered as a coward behavior that goes against the Mahayana spirit. Indeed, the study, contemplation and practice of the Dharma is the best treatment for all illnesses. As Khenpo mentioned about himself, he tends to be under the weather whenever he takes holidays or has no teachings for even one day. But if he is busy with the Dharma teachings or other Dharma activities, he feels well and many ailments would be gone.

⁵ A better translation should be **Without becoming complete in the *dharmas* of Buddhahood, they will not extinguish their experiences and acquire the realization of cessation.**

Given the suffering of their bodies, they think of sentient beings in the evil destinations and generate great compassion, [thinking] ‘I have already controlled [my suffering] and I should also control [the suffering] of all sentient beings.’

“Just eliminate the illness; do not eliminate *dharmas*. [Bodhisattvas] teach [sentient beings] so that they eliminate the basis of their illness.

When bodhisattvas fall sick, they think of beings in three lower realms and generate great compassion towards them. This is bodhisattvas’ way of enduring the pain of sickness. As ordinary practitioners, we should also try to recall the unbearable suffering of the beings in the three lower realms and cultivate compassion towards them. For example, we can think to ourselves, “If I cannot endure the insignificant pain now, how could I bear the suffering if I were reborn in the lower realms?” As *Letter to a Friend* says:

*Even if seeing paintings of the joyless realms,
Hearing about them, holding images of them in your mind,
Reading about or watching physical enactments of them makes you generate terror,
What need to mention when you’d actually have to experience them as the unbearable ripening of your negative karma?*

In this way, we will generate compassion toward those poor beings. Or simply, when we see the pathetic beings with our own eyes, sympathy will naturally arise in us. For example, if we have a headache or a certain kind of pain and go to the hospital, we will feel surprised that there are so many people who have the same symptom. Then, the hospital becomes a place to help us develop sincere compassion towards others since it demonstrates all sorts of suffering of human beings.

Since bodhisattvas can tame their own minds and eliminate their suffering by bringing sickness onto the Dharma path, they are able to tame the mind of sentient beings in the same way and eradicate their suffering of illness. When bodhisattvas help living beings, they would eliminate their sickness and not deprive them of anything related to the true reality. In other words, bodhisattvas would merely teach and guide them with the Dharma so that they can cut off the basis of illness, namely, desire, aggression and ignorance, as well as delusion and wrong views caused by these mental afflictions.

The Dharma is like an antidote, a treatment, with which bodhisattvas can eradicate the suffering of sentient beings and eliminate their illnesses. So to relieve their pain temporarily, bodhisattvas can provide them with medicines; and to completely rid them of their illnesses, bodhisattvas will teach sentient beings the emptiness of individuals to sever the basis of their illness. This is how bodhisattvas tame the minds of other beings in the way of taming their own mind. As the Mahayana followers, we should try all means to give comfort to the patients and poor people around us, even if we could only bring them some temporary happiness.

“What is the basis of their illness? It is the presence of objectified mentation. It is through objectified mentation that the basis of illness is constituted.

“What is objectified mentation? It is the triple world. What is it to eliminate objectified mentation? It is done with nonattainment.

“If there is no attainment, there is no objectified mentation. What is nonattainment? It is the transcendence of dualistic views.

What are dualistic views? They are the internalistic view and externalistic view. These are without attainment (i.e., not apprehensible).

The basis, or the root of sentient beings' illness is the presence of objectified mentation, which is referred to specifically as subject-object grasping. Kumarajiva explained that when the mind is attached to an object, it is the presence of objectified mentation. In other words, any grasping at any phenomenon, that involves the three conceptual spheres of subject, object and action, is called the objectified mentation. Craving, grasping, clinging or attachment, all belong to the objectified mentation, which is the root of sentient beings' illness. Once we realize the selflessness of individuals and phenomena, and penetrate the illusory nature of everything, we will be able to uproot the suffering of samsara, like an Arhat does, and experience the pain of illness merely in an illusory manner.

Then what is objectified by our dualistic mind? They are all phenomena in the triple world, i.e., desire realm, form realm and formless realm. All phenomena within the domain of three realms are objectified, either by the meditative concentration in form or formless realms, or by the mindset of desire, anger, and ignorance in the desire realm. How can we eliminate the objectified mentation? It is through the realization of emptiness. If we understand that all

phenomena are empty and lack of true existence, we know there is nothing to be objectified and grasped, and there is nothing that can be attained.

So what is nonattainment? It is free from the dualistic views, namely, the view of the inner mind that can perceive, and the view of the outer objects that can be perceived. When these dualistic views are transcended, it is the state of nonattainment. Furthermore, since there is no attainment, there is no nonattainment either. The absence of both attainment and nonattainment, both view and no view, is the highest state of enlightenment in both Zen and Great Perfection practices.

Once there is a Zen master, Yu'an, who was suddenly enlightened when reading the following verse in the *Surangama Sutra*,

*[You now] base your knowledge
On awareness and perception,
But that is fundamental ignorance.
Nirvana is in the absence of a view
Regarding awareness and perception.*

There were few punctuation marks in the ancient Chinese Buddhist scriptures, so Yu'an read the whole sentence in a wrong way. But he still grasped the meaning that if there is a view being established, it is the root cause of ignorance, and that if one is able to eliminate all views, it is the enlightenment that leads one to nirvana. So thanks to the blessings of the sutra and his lineage masters, Yu'an achieved enlightenment through this verse.

This verse tells us that the nature of the mind cannot be perceived, and the absence of dualistic views is the real nirvana. Certainly, if we only know this theory and are not skilled at the practice, we may find it difficult to be actualized in our life. But if we practice it well, either by following the Middle Way or tantric guidance, we will be able to use this sublime instruction to sever the illness at its root when we fall sick.

“Manjushri, this is how bodhisattvas who are ill control their minds. This is how they eliminate old age, illness, death, and suffering. This is the bodhisattva’s *bodhi*. If it were not like this, then my cultivation would be a foolish waste. It is like one who is

victorious over his enemies being called a hero: this is the term for the bodhisattva who has simultaneously eliminated old age, illness, and death⁶.

The bodhisattva's *bodhi* means the path of bodhisattvas. Vimalakirti told Manjushri that the purpose of bodhisattvas' taming the minds of themselves and sentient beings is to eradicate their suffering of birth (added in the Tibetan and Sanskrit versions), old age, sickness and death. This is the bodhisattva's path. So a real bodhisattva will control his own mind and meanwhile uproot sentient beings' birth, aging, illness and death.

Some Buddhists who follow Humanistic Buddhism usually promote topics that cater to the present needs of most ordinary people who are mainly concerned about their worldly life, like how to live a happy life, how to make a successful career and so on. Perhaps that is a skillful means to spread the Dharma to the majority of people, since they are deeply attracted by worldly pleasures and enjoyment and have less concern about their future life. But for bodhisattvas who have generated bodhichitta, their priority is to guide sentient beings to break free from the cyclic existence of samsara by teaching them the sublime Dharma.

Most people in the world have no idea about the true reality of birth, aging, illness and death, so when they have to face these situations, they are really frightened and overwhelmed and become helpless. When the same circumstances happen to Dharma practitioners, their attitude and approach can be totally different. Those experienced practitioners who are even illiterate can face death with confidence and serenity because they have comprehended special pith instructions. Without such supreme teachings however, even those smart scholars and scientists who dedicate their whole life to the research of certain unknown and mysterious things do not know how to face loneliness, old age and death, which is very unfortunate. Therefore, we should know that it is necessary to bring others temporary happiness, but more importantly, it is to bring them the profound Dharma that can guide them to realize the ultimate truth of life.

So Vimalakirti continues, if one does not diligently practice the Dharma to eliminate birth, old age, sickness and death but only engages oneself in various practices conceived by one's discursive thoughts, then all those practices are for vain and meaningless, which can be considered as a foolish waste. Here a metaphor is used to underscore the importance of eliminating the cyclic existence. If one has won the battle and conquered the enemies, he is

⁶ A better translation could be **who has eliminated old age, illness, and death altogether.**

hailed as a hero or warrior. By the same token, if one has eliminated the enemies of old age, illness and death, he is named a bodhisattva or a wisdom warrior. So a real wisdom warrior is the one who realizes emptiness, eradicates ignorance and uproots birth, old age and death by following the Dharma teachings. This is the reason why Buddha Shakyamuni and his numerous followers renounced their worldly lives and fully engaged themselves in spiritual practices. Besides their own enlightenment, they also strived for the liberation of all living beings from the cyclic existence of birth, old age, sickness and death.

The above tells us how the ailing bodhisattvas eradicate the illness of themselves and others, and the following text says that bodhisattvas should not hold an affectionate view. In other words, bodhisattvas should generate non-referential compassion towards sentient beings without any clinging.

“Bodhisattvas who are ill should think as follows: ‘If this illness of mine is neither real nor existent, then the illnesses of sentient beings are also neither real nor existent.’

“When performing this contemplation, [such bodhisattvas] may generate an affectionate view of great compassion with regard to (i.e., sentimental compassion toward) sentient beings, but this should be forsaken. Why?

There are various illnesses of sentient beings, including both physical and mental illnesses. Indeed, as long as our mind is infected with the viruses of desire, aggression and ignorance, we are mentally sick and often generate wrong views. So bodhisattvas should contemplate illnesses in the following way: after careful observation, I know my illness is not real and has no solid existence, then the illnesses of all others also do not truly exist.

At this moment, if we think that sentient beings are pitiful because they are laden with those physical and mental illnesses, and if we believe their illnesses as well as our compassion have true existences, then we develop attachments to sentient beings and we have an affectionate view of compassion towards them. As long as we fall into this extreme, thinking that sentient beings, their illnesses, our compassion, and the merit generated by our compassion all truly exist, our compassion is defiled by our attachment and affection and we fail to generate non-referential compassion. As a matter of fact, bodhisattvas should renounce the affectionate view of compassion and cultivate the great compassion without any reference. The reason is given below.

“Bodhisattvas eliminate the vexations of sensory data and generate great compassion. If they have an affectionate view of compassion, they would thereby generate aversion toward samsara. If they are able to transcend this they will not have any [such] aversion, and no matter where they are subsequently reborn they will not be limited by any affectionate view.

Bodhisattvas should understand that any grasping on certain characteristic belongs to adventitious stains, and only after eliminating all these temporary defilements can the real great compassion be generated in their mind. If they are attached to any characteristic, thinking that sentient beings are real, compassion is real, and so on, then their compassion is marked by affection and concern, and as a result, they would have feelings of weariness and revulsion towards the endless samsara and grow weary of benefiting others. For example, although some people feel sympathy for the stray animals in the beginning and bring them home, they are easily irritated when the pets are naughty or not welcomed by the family. It is as if their compassion has aged and turns into resentment. As His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche often said, “The long-time affectionate compassion becomes aversion.”

However, if we realize that the nature of sentient beings is illusory and unreal, like the moon’s reflection in water or flowers in a dream, we will be able to transcend the affectionate view and generate the great compassion without any reference. At that moment, we can still clearly feel and understand sentient beings’ suffering, but we would not generate any aversion or weariness towards the endless samsara, and we would rather remain tireless in inspiring and helping sentient beings.

This shows the importance of understanding and actualizing the teaching of emptiness. If we realize the empty nature of phenomena and living beings, we won’t develop attachment to all these illusory appearances, then as a result, we will be able to benefit those illusory beings in an illusory manner without any weariness. Otherwise, our compassion would be just some temporary affection and concern that cannot last forever.

For instance, some people can always persist in Dharma activities, while some others give up quickly and complain, “I’m fed up with this tiring work. Those people are too difficult to work with and no one understands me!” As they cling to the true existence of this and that, it is for sure that they will be tired of them soon. But once they understand that all phenomena

are dreamlike and they have the responsibility of helping sentient beings to wake up from their illusory dreams, they will not have so many emotional feelings and sufferings.

Therefore, it is important for us to develop the great compassion without reference by realizing emptiness. Then, no matter what we are doing, where we are, our aspirations and actions will not be tainted by the affectionate view. As the *Diamond Sutra* says, “When vast, uncountable, immeasurable numbers of beings have thus been liberated, verily no being has been liberated.” On the conventional level bodhisattvas have liberated immeasurable sentient beings, yet ultimately speaking the so-called beings never truly exist under the observation of the wisdom of emptiness.

They will be born without bonds and be able to explain the Dharma to sentient beings and emancipate them from their bonds.

Here “without bonds” means unfettered by craving and grasping. Some people often struggle, “Shall I get down the mountain to propagate the Dharma? Or shall I get up the mountain to do the retreat?” It is as if they are standing on the mountainside. In fact, as long as their mind is unbound, wherever they are, they are able to explain the Dharma to sentient beings and liberate them from their bonds.

Most people, including ourselves, do need the Dharma teaching to release themselves from bonds. Although the other religions’ doctrines have their own values and deserve our respects, Khenpo sincerely feels that the Buddhadharma is indispensable in this era, without which people may not get true happiness.

It is true that no matter how powerful or wealthy, many people always have to face various emotional issues and cannot truly experience happiness. We may reckon that some high officials or celebrities are happy because they are always well treated and surrounded by their supporters. But once you are in their shoes, you will understand their own predicaments and suffering. However, it doesn’t matter whether we are rich or poor, beautiful or ugly, as long as we study and practice the Dharma, we will generate great inner strength in our daily lives, and bring forth the great power and true happiness for our future lives.

“It is as the Buddha has explained: ‘It is impossible for someone with bonds to emancipate others from their bonds. It is only possible for someone without bonds to

emancipate others from their bonds.’ Therefore, bodhisattvas should not generate bonds.

Vimalakirti further quoted from the Buddha and explain that it is impossible for someone who is fettered by karmas and afflictions to liberate others, just like someone who is shackled cannot unshackle others. Therefore, bodhisattvas should not be bound by attachments, including the attachment to any being or any phenomenon.

So we’d better not have a strong attachment to anything or anyone, otherwise, we are hard to truly benefit others. Of course, as ordinary beings, we cannot be totally free from bonds, so it is crucial for us to learn and practice the Mahayana teachings in the long term. Meanwhile, in order to bring benefit to others, we should also strive to spread the Dharma teaching to others, and during this procedure, we can remind ourselves of the illusory and empty nature of all things. As the frequently cited verse goes, “Dharma activities are dreamlike and the places of enlightenment are water-moon like.” In this way, we can face any difficulty calmly and with no frustration or desperation at all, and eventually cut through all our attachments.

When His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche went on a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai, one day the moment he sat on the Dharma throne, the sangha was chanting the following verse of *The King of Aspiration Prayers*,

*Just like the lotus flower to which mud and water cannot cling,
Or sun and moon that course unhindered through the sky.*

His Holiness said pleasantly, “This is an auspicious sign that implies our activities of spreading the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings will be smooth and unhindered, like the untainted lotus and the unhindered sun and moon. We will be able to benefit countless sentient beings and possess all the favorable conditions.”

Following the footprints of His holiness, we should also rid ourselves of all kinds of clinging under any circumstance. Khenpo talked about his trips in 2017 as an example. Last year, he planned to visit four to five European countries and was about to fly to Beijing and then to Europe one day afternoon. But that afternoon he was asked to attend an emergent meeting at 3 pm, so he took his backpack to the meeting room and prepared to leave right after the meeting. However, at the meeting, the people in the room looked at him embarrassedly and finally, he was informed that he couldn’t go abroad this time. Khenpo’s first reaction was

that it's meaningless to feel annoyed, so he told them that he was fine with this unexpected decision. Later he spent that period of time translating Gampopa's *A Precious Garland of the Supreme Path*. Again this year, 2018, Khenpo scheduled to visit Japan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Malaysia, etc., but the journey had to be cancelled. Khenpo was not upset at all and later he made the trip to Africa instead. Therefore, when one door is closed, another is open. In this phenomenal world, everything is uncertain and keeps changing, like a dream or a magic phantom, and we shouldn't stick ourselves firmly to one thing and then be easily overwhelmed by any unexpected adversity.

“What are bonds, and what is emancipation?”

“A desirous attachment to the flavor of meditation is the bond of bodhisattvas; and birth through skillful means is the emancipation of bodhisattvas.”

Now Vimalakirti illuminates what are bonds and what is emancipation. Clinging to the flavor of meditation, i.e., the meditation experiences of bliss, clarity and absence of thoughts, is the bond of bodhisattvas, and transcending such experiences through the application of skillful means is the emancipation of bodhisattvas. So even the experiences of meditation should not be lingered over. As it is said in *The Play in Full*,

*Remaining immovable and calm,
He sat not to feel the taste of absorption;
Rather, motivated by compassion for others,
He sought to bring about vast benefits to all beings.*

It means that one's body and mind should remain peaceful and immovable, and instead of clinging to the meditation experience of bliss, one develops great compassion towards sentient beings. This is the emancipation of bodhisattvas. There's one more sentence that Khenpo especially likes in this sutra,

*In order to benefit sentient beings,
Buddha's mind is as vast as space.*

Khenpo remarked that when we spread the Dharma to benefit others, we should not be easily distressed or upset as it is normal for us to encounter various kinds of people. If we regard most of them as bodhisattvas, it shows that our practice is fairly well. If we can't get along

well with one or two of them, it is also okay as the relation with others is usually under the sway of past karmas. But if we dislike most of them, it only proves that we are not good Dharma practitioners. Khenpo suggests us to remember this verse and to be broad-minded, otherwise, if we are dispirited every so often we are unable to inspire and benefit others.

The following text talks about four types of bondage and emancipation, i.e., wisdom without skillful means is bondage, and wisdom with skillful means is emancipation; skillful means without wisdom is bondage, and skillful means with wisdom is emancipation.

“Further, to be without skillful means is to have one’s wisdom in bondage, while to have skillful means is to have one’s wisdom emancipated.

“To be without wisdom is to have one’s skillful means in bondage, while to have wisdom is to have one’s skillful means emancipated.

“What is it to be without skillful means and one’s wisdom in bondage? It is for bodhisattvas to use affection to ornament the buddha lands and accomplish [the salvation of] sentient beings, to control oneself within [the three emancipations of] emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness. This is called being without skillful means and one’s wisdom in bondage.

First, what is meant by saying that wisdom without skillful means is bondage? If bodhisattvas have an affectionate view of compassion towards sentient beings and regard all phenomena as true existence, and as a result, they try to adorn the real buddha lands and benefit real sentient beings, and meanwhile they tame their own mind through the three gateways to liberation, then they only possess the wisdom of nonexistence and do not have any skillful means. This is the cause of bondage instead of emancipation.

“What is it to have skillful means with one’s wisdom emancipated? It is not to use affection to ornament the buddha lands and accomplish [the liberation of] sentient beings, and to control oneself so as to be without aversion within [the three emancipations of] emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness. This is called having skillful means with one’s wisdom emancipated.

Second, what is meant by saying that wisdom with skillful means leads to emancipation? Bodhisattvas generate great compassion without reference, so with a mind free of affection

and concern, they adorn the buddha lands and liberate numerous sentient beings tirelessly, and meanwhile, they tame their own mind by meditating on emptiness, absence of characteristics and wishlessness, then they possess the wisdom with skillful means. This will lead them to emancipation.

“What is it to be without wisdom and have one’s skillful means in bondage? It is for bodhisattvas to plant a host of virtuous roots while abiding in the afflictions of desire, anger, and false views. This is called being without wisdom with one’s skillful means in bondage.

Third, what is meant by saying that skillful means without wisdom is bondage? If bodhisattvas’ virtuous activities and merits are defiled by desire, anger and wrong views, and with a lack of the wisdom of emptiness, their practices are just another type of bondage that cannot lead them to emancipation. For example, some Dharma practitioners aspire to generate bodhichitta but still quarrel or fight with others, indicating that without the guidance of the wisdom of emptiness, they are tormented by afflictive emotions. As a result, their efforts of engaging in virtuous practices may only accumulate some worldly merits.

“What is it to have wisdom with one’s skillful means emancipated? It is to transcend the afflictions of desire, anger, and false views and plant a host of virtuous roots, rededicating [the merit to one’s achievement of] *anuttara samyaksambodhi*. This is called having wisdom with one’s skillful means emancipated.

Fourth, what is meant by saying that skillful means with wisdom leads to emancipation? If bodhisattvas renounce the afflictions of desire, aggression and wrong views, then their accumulation of merits and their dedication to the unsurpassable perfect enlightenment will directly lead them to emancipation. So this is the best practice and if we ordinary practitioners cannot fully suppress our mental afflictions, we should still be persistent in practicing virtuous deeds, such as listening and studying the Dharma teaching, chanting the mantra, doing voluntary work and so on. And when interacting with others, we should try our best not to displease others. Otherwise, if we practice virtues in a bad mood, it is hard to say whether our merits will outweigh our faults.

Lecture 30

The last part of the fifth chapter mainly talks about the differences between Shravaka and Mahayana Buddhism. Before the lecture, Khenpo emphasized one more time that these teachings are very crucial, and even if we can only follow one lecture, we will gain a distinctive insight in Buddhism. Although some people have studied and practiced the Dharma for many years, they don't really understand Buddhism, and the essence of the Buddhist doctrine is still their blind spot. So Khenpo hopes that through the study of this sutra, most people will have a comprehensive understanding of the Mahayana teaching and generate a steadfast faith in Buddhism.

Khenpo also talked about his feelings in teaching this sutra. As he said, "I have been learning Buddhism ever since my childhood and have over thirty year's formal training in Buddhism. Although I do not consider myself as excellent in comprehending all the Buddhist philosophies, I'm quite familiar with Sutrayana and Tantrayana and still keep learning and practicing these great teachings. This time while I study and teach the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, I have gained an even deeper and fresher insight in Mahayana Buddhism from every lecture. So I believe that most of you will also be greatly benefited from this sutra."

How Should the Bodhisattva Who is Ill Control his Mind?

As for how the ailing bodhisattvas should tame their mind, the previous teaching talks about the way of cultivating wisdom and skillful means with regard to their sickness. The following teaching talks about how to develop wisdom and skillful means concerning their body, as well as concerning the relationship between their body and sickness. Skillful means actually refers to compassion. So all these teachings are focused on the cultivation of wisdom and compassion in a complementary way.

“Also, to contemplate the body as impermanent, suffering, empty, and no-self is called wisdom.

“Although the body is ill, it always exists in samsara. To benefit all without tiring—this is called skillful means.

With regard to the body, to contemplate it as impermanent, suffering, empty and selfless is called wisdom. While to stay in samsara and benefit sentient beings tirelessly despite the fact that the body is fragile and full of suffering is called skillful means.

Here comprehending that the body is impermanent and possessing the quality of suffering is the conventional wisdom in samsara, and realizing that the very nature of the body is empty and selfless is the ultimate wisdom for transcending samsara. So these are two types of wisdom of both conventional truth and ultimate truth. If we understand the meanings of impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and selflessness, we will have an overall understanding of Buddhism wisdom.

Impermanence is the key among these four. Once we grasp the meaning of impermanence, it is not hard for us to realize the other three. So it is essential for us to deeply reflect on its teaching and be mindful of it in our daily life. In *the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, it says,

The prime of manhood is not long;

Luxuriance meets with illness;

Life is swallowed by death;

Nothing exists eternally.

This is a good teaching for all of us. If we have a deep and strong awareness that our youth will not last long, our good looks will certainly wither during illness, the anticipated long life will be soon swallowed by death, and nothing in this world is stable and reliable, then we can easily make progress in our Dharma practices and all the other spiritual achievements will be within easy reach of us.

In *the Metaphor Sutra of Dharma Words*, there is a story about Lotus, a prostitute who was extremely beautiful and attracted many people's admiration. One day, she all of a sudden had the thought of getting ordained. On the way to take ordination, she walked through a forest and drank the spring water to quench her thirst. When she saw her lovely reflection in the water, she was proud of herself and thought: "It is a pity for such a beauty like me to get ordained."

So Lotus was reluctant to get ordained and was on her way back. At that time, the Buddha observed through his wisdom that it was time to convert her, so the Buddha manifested a

more beautiful woman in front of her and they two walked together happily. When they got tired and had a rest, the manifested woman put her head on the lap and took a nap. But after a while, she suddenly died and the corpse quickly started to change colors, swell and rot, and became very filthy. Lotus was so scared that she immediately generated a strong mind of renunciation and went to the Buddha to take ordination.

The Buddha gave her four instructions: 1) Young people will get old; 2) Strong and healthy people will die; 3) A gathering will eventually disperse; 4) The accumulated wealth will disappear. After hearing the teachings, Lotus attained enlightenment.

We can see from this story that Lotus firstly became aware of impermanence and suffering of this world, and then realized the ultimate truth of emptiness and selflessness. Or in a simple way, we may say that understanding impermanence can be the cause to realize suffering is the true reality of this phenomenal world; and furthermore, realizing emptiness is the cause to eliminate self-cling in one's mind. This is how we can develop the wisdom on both conventional and ultimate level.

Then what is skillful means? Although the physical body is fragile and tends to be sick, bodhisattvas will always stay in samsara and bring benefit to all living beings, and never give in to weariness or revulsion to this world. Bodhisattvas would never feel tired of benefiting others, and they have various skillful means to do so. Some bodhisattvas appear to be sick, regularly take medicine and go to a hospital. Actually, in this way they can inspire many people to renounce samsara and then follow the path of liberation.

Khenpo recalled that His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche used to appear weak and sick very often. When they went to India, His Holiness brought along a doctor and many medicines, and took pills every day. It was the same when they went to the United States and the Han areas in China. His Holiness also received treatments in quite a few hospitals around the area of Chengdu. Whenever Khenpo Sodargye passes by those hospitals, he would think that his guru had been there and made auspicious connections with many living beings. Just like this, bodhisattvas can have various manifestations for the sake of sentient beings and never get weary of it.

Some people might think: "I will get sick, and so will that master. What's the difference?" Or as ordinary disciples, we may wonder, "How can a guru get sick? Why does my guru get sick so often?" Indeed, when we ordinary people get sick, we are usually overwhelmed by our

sickness, feel tired of our bodies or even try to abandon our life, while bodhisattvas such as Vimalakirti will choose to fall sick in order to bring benefit to others, for example, giving the Dharma teaching to his visitors. So speaking of bodhisattvas' skillful means, they will constantly stay in samsara to benefit beings in various ways.

“Also, in contemplating the body, [one should realize] that the body does not transcend illness and illness does not transcend the body, and that this illness and this body are neither new nor old—this is called wisdom. For one’s body to be ill but never die⁷ is called skillful means.

The wisdom here lies in the contemplation on the body and illness. As a matter of fact, the physical body and illness cannot be apart from each other, and they are neither before nor after one another. So literally we can say that the body is never rid of illness, and illness is never rid of the body, and they exist together. The Tibetan and Xuanzang’s versions have a slightly different translation, saying that the body, mind and illness are interdependent and are neither new nor old whether considered simultaneously or sequentially. The realization of this reality is called wisdom.

According to Master Sengzhao’s commentary, the body and illness are compounded and interdependent phenomena. Illness is generated from the body and the body is a composite phenomenon belonging to the five aggregates, and the five aggregates, in turn, are caused by delusion and ignorance and never apart from illness. In a narrow sense, the so-called illness refers to that among the “birth, old age, illness and death”. In a broad sense however, it refers to the attributes of compounded phenomena, i.e., impermanence and being able to be destroyed. As long as one thing is impermanent and can be destroyed, it belongs to illness. So if we understand the principle of dependent origination, we know that the body and illness, or the body, mind and illness are interdependent on one another and are combined together in an illusory and temporary manner. The realization of this is called wisdom.

Khenpo was in poor health when he started to teach the *Lotus Sutra* a few years ago, so he recalled this teaching, “the body does not transcend illness and illness does not transcend the body”. Some Dharma friends seem to be frequently sick too, and are bothered by certain kinds of pain day to day. Such is samsaric life. Even though we look strong and healthy on the surface, who knows how long our health can be maintained? When His Holiness Jigme

⁷ A proper translation should be **but one never enters into cessation.**

Phuntsok Rinpoche was asked about how his health condition was, he usually answered that there's no big change. Sometimes we are sick and sometimes we get better, and the whole situation is just controlled by various causes and conditions. If we can understand that the body is none other than illness and they interdependently arise from each other, we gain the wisdom of the true reality.

Then what is skillful means in regard to this wisdom? Even this physical body is weighed down with sickness, we shouldn't seek the cessation of the body, like what some Shravaka bhikshus did when they felt a strong aversion to their bodies. The sick bodhisattvas would never abandon their bodies and enter into the extinguished and peaceful nirvana, but would rather utilize their illness to benefit sentient beings and enhance their Dharma practices. This is called the skillful means of bodhisattvas.

Laozi says, "What makes me liable to great calamity is my having the body." The body is the source of all troubles and sufferings. Some people are unsatisfied with their appearance and poor health, some others even torture their bodies by certain ascetic practices. Shravaka practitioners consider the body as contaminated and to be abandoned. As bodhisattvas however, they are clearly aware of the body's faults, but they merely use their bodies to practice the Dharma and benefit others. This is the way that we should follow, to properly use our body by learning from bodhisattvas' skillful means.

The Practice of Bodhisattvas

“Manjushri, thus should bodhisattvas who are ill control the mind. They should not abide within [the controlled mind], and they should also not abide in the uncontrolled mind. Why? To abide in the uncontrolled mind is the Dharma of fools. To abide in the controlled mind is the Dharma of shravakas. Therefore, bodhisattvas should not abide in either the controlled or uncontrolled mind. To transcend these two Dharmas is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Bodhisattvas should control the mind in this way: First, they should not abide in the “controlled mind”, which is the state of shravakas who usually enter into the absorption of cessation as the way of taming their mind. Second, they should not abide in the “uncontrolled mind”, which is like an energetic monkey that is always distracted by the outside world. The uncontrolled mind belongs to ordinary beings and is called the mind of fools because ordinary

people do not see the truth of all phenomena and often get caught up in distractions. Especially in this modern era, people are addicted to various social media and entertainment such as Wechat, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok and so on. This kind of addiction is similar to drug addiction.

Scientists have found that the brain will be stimulated by certain neurotransmitters such as Dopamine after taking drugs, so individual become addicted to drugs and cannot stop. Similarly, social media addiction is due to these neurotransmitters present in our brains that are released during our texting, tweeting, or checking messages. As a result, people are deeply obsessed with the use of social media and are unable to control their use of it. Researchers at Chicago University concluded that social media addiction can be stronger than the addiction to cigarettes and alcohol following an experiment in which they recorded the cravings of several hundred people for several weeks. Media cravings ranked ahead of cravings for cigarettes and alcohol.

So this is a new way of taking drugs, not through eating but through seeing. People know that some of what they do day to day is meaningless, but they just cannot control themselves. Once their phones are not at hand, some people may panic and look for them everywhere. Such kind of reliance on phones is no other than drug addiction, both of which are the causes of mental contamination.

Therefore, ordinary people have the uncontrolled mind and bodhisattvas do not abide in such a mind of fools. Meanwhile, they do not abide in the controlled mind of shravakas and pratyekabuddhas, which is to abide in the peaceful nirvana of cessation for numerous eons. They are both extremes that bodhisattvas avoid, so to transcend these two minds is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Vimalakirti's teachings here are quite helpful for us to understand the similarities and differences between the Shravakayana and Mahayana teaching regarding their views and practices. Most people may consider Buddhism only as Shravakayana Buddhism since its view shares some similarities with the traditional morality and ethics, while they know little about the views and practices of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. Certainly, Shravakayana Buddhism is more suitable for beginners because it has specific requirements regarding one's behavior and speech, the practice of which is easier for beginners to follow. However, if we want to cultivate an altruistic mind of great compassion and further realize the

ultimate truth of emptiness, we must follow the Mahayana teaching, because the Shravakayana teaching does not explain the true reality of all phenomena thoroughly. And on top of this, if we have a chance to study Vajrayana Buddhism, we will gain an even more complete understanding of Buddhism.

Given this reason, Khenpo feels more confident to explain the *Vimalakirti Sutra* since he was trained in Tibetan Buddhism which includes all these three levels. Particularly, if one understands the essential meaning of the statement “afflictions is none other than Bodhi” in the context of the Vajrayana teaching, one will have no difficulty to grasp the profound meaning in this sutra.

But this does not mean that we can undervalue the Shravakayana training. Without any controversy, the Shravakayana teaching is the easiest and safest way for beginners to tame their minds. The disciplines required in Shravakayana Buddhism conform perfectly with social morality and the noble code of ethics in different countries, such as renouncing the unwholesome actions of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and sowing discord, etc. On the other hand, although the practices of bodhisattvas completely accord with the Buddha’s teaching, due to its profundity and more emphasis on controlling one’s mind rather than one’s behavior, certain kinds of practices in Mahayana Buddhism might not be understood and accepted by ordinary people. As a result, some people who have limited knowledge of Buddhism may even make careless comments on Mahayana Buddhism and introduce more misunderstanding to beginners. So we’d better understand the difference between these two traditions regarding their views and practices.

To be within samsara and not undertake polluted practices, to abide in nirvana and never become extinguished: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although bodhisattvas stay in the samsara of birth and death, they are unlike ordinary beings whose minds are constantly defiled by the mental afflictions of desire, anger, ignorance, etc. Although bodhisattvas abide in nirvana, they are unlike shravakas who choose to abide in the absorption of cessation and become completely extinguished. This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Ordinary people are easily affected by the environment and people around, but bodhisattvas are never defiled by any samsaric contamination. They realize the emptiness of all phenomena and abide in peaceful nirvana, but they would not hold any aversion towards samsara and seek

for the absorption of cessation. Rather, bodhisattvas will always stay in samsara and use various skillful means to benefit sentient beings.

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* says, “Bodhisattvas, free from all karmic force to be born in samsara, stay in samara out of their compassion.” Like the lotus flowers which mud and water cannot stain, bodhisattvas are unfettered by the cyclic existence of birth and death, yet they do not rid themselves of samsara. In the *Platform Sutra*, it also says that the Buddhadharma is rooted in the world and the enlightenment of Bodhi cannot happen apart from the world. So bodhisattvas, without any hesitation, always stay in samsara and use all kinds of skillful means to guide and benefit sentient beings. Some Dharma practitioners are afraid of making contact with different people, and prefer to practice in solitude or stay inside a tranquil monastery to avoid the worldly affairs. This is not the practice of bodhisattvas.

“It is neither the practice of ordinary [unenlightened persons] nor the practice of the wise and sagely: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

The practice of bodhisattvas is not like that of ordinary beings, which according to Kumarajiva, can be divided into three types: virtuous, non-virtuous and unwavering actions. The previous two cause pleasant or painful experience in the desire realm, and the last one leads to the rebirth in form or formless realm. Bodhisattvas’ actions transcend all three of them. Furthermore, the practice of bodhisattvas is not that of the wise and sagely, i.e., the practice of shravakas and pratyekabuddhas who abide in the peaceful and extinguished state of liberation. Then beyond the practice of ordinary beings and shravakas, what kind of practice do bodhisattvas possess? It is to realize the ultimate truth of emptiness and meanwhile to benefit living beings in samsara tirelessly.

“It is neither a defiled practice nor a pure practice: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Ordinary beings tend to conduct non-virtuous deeds such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying or other illegal acts, due to their strong mental afflictions of desire, aggression and ignorance. Bodhisattvas are not like this. Yet, they do not abide in serenity and only maintain a solemn and pure manner. So the practice of bodhisattvas is neither pure nor impure.

Most people think that a qualified Buddhist must observe pure conduct. However, the clinging to pure conduct is also an extreme being transcended by bodhisattvas. Ordinary people

usually judge a Buddhist's practice and spiritual realization from their external behaviors. For example, if people see a modestly dressed monastic walking in a solemn manner, they will compliment, "This must be an extraordinary monk!" If they see a monk acting in a crazy way beyond their common sense, they will disapprove of him no matter how many beneficial activities he has carried on.

Therefore, many people don't really understand why the practice of bodhisattvas can be impure. Take the famous novelist Jin Yong as an example. The death of his eldest son was a devastating blow to him, and then he had a sense of renunciation for the worldly life. So he started to study Buddhism and read many books about Theravada Buddhism. As a result, he regarded the Theravada teachings as the ultimate view of Buddhism, and frequently illustrated the pure conducts of the Theravada tradition in his novels. However, he couldn't accept other kinds of behaviors, and his depiction of Tibetan Buddhism turned out to be a denigration. Some people criticized his writings, and he also realized his mistakes in his late years, but it was too late as his works were already so popular among Chinese and many people were deeply influenced by his opinions.

Not only Mr. Jin Yong, back to the 1970s and 1980s, the majority of people in China interpreted Buddhism merely as Shravakayana Buddhism. Due to this historical background, even today many people barely understand the Mahayana or Vajrayana teaching, and what they care about are only moral codes and behaviors, such as one's clothing, walking posture, the manner of behaviors, etc. With the lack of a holistic view of Buddhism and a relative understanding of Mahayana philosophy, people regard the Shravakayana tradition as the whole of Buddhism and thus hold revulsion towards other behaviors that are not in line with moral ethics. When they talk about Buddhism, their first thought is abstaining from meat-eating or renouncing worldly life, but seldom refers to the teaching of emptiness, the skillful means of attracting and benefiting others.

In western countries, it seems a little bit different as people don't regard "fine comportment" as the principal standard of Buddhists. Rather, they prefer those practices that are more considerate, skillful and adaptable to the worldly people, which are commonly seen in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. In that case, somehow they may neglect the importance of observing the pure conduct that is required in Shravakayana Buddhism. Indeed, like what Vimalakirti taught here, the practice of bodhisattvas is neither pure nor impure. If we limit Buddhism to the pure conduct of the Shravakayana tradition, it is an over-generalization. And

if we think the Shravakayana practice is not necessary for modern people to follow, it is another misunderstanding. Certainly, such Mahayana practices are too profound for common people to understand. Nevertheless, it is quite necessary for us to comprehend the Mahayana teachings through systematic learning.

“Although in the past one [performed] the practices of Mara, in the present one subjugates the host of Maras: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.”⁸

In the Tibetan and Xuanzang’s versions this sentence goes as, “Although manifesting the four Maras, one transcends all the works of Mara.” Bodhisattvas have already transcended the works of Maras, and meanwhile, they can manifest the four Maras. Maras are indeed the illusory display of the mind, and there is no real Mara outside the mind. Realizing this true reality, bodhisattvas can also manifest the subjugation of the host of Maras.

Some people may ask, “Why would bodhisattvas subdue Maras?” In fact, while it is difficult to tame Maras in a gentle and moderate way, bodhisattvas will discipline them in a wrathful way, just like a mother who will treat her kid harshly if her gentle words do not work. Thus, when bodhisattvas manifest in the wrathful forms such as Yamantaka and Wrathful Padmasambhava, they just need to do so to subjugate the powerful force of Maras, not because they are angry with them. Bodhisattvas can take various forms of manifestation, all of which do not exist in the ultimate truth, but are indispensable in the phenomenal world. Therefore, the practice of bodhisattvas can be peaceful or wrathful, pure or impure.

In the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra*, it says, “Bhikkhus who uphold vows do not take rebirth in heaven, and bhikkhus who break vows do not fall into hell. Why? Because in the Dharmadhatu,

there are no such things as upholding or breaking vows.” By realizing the ultimate truth, bodhisattvas have transcended purity and impurity, hell and heaven, the works of Maras and the subjugation of Maras. They can display in various forms in accord with the different situations of living beings in order to guide them to attain spiritual realization.

“To seek omniscience but not to seek it at the improper time: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.”

⁸ A correct translation should be **Although far transcending the works of Mara, one manifests the subjugation of the host of Maras: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.**

Bodhisattvas seek the Buddha's wisdom of omniscience, but they won't seek it at the improper time. In other words, they won't enter into nirvana when the time is not right. Instead, when the proper causes and conditions come together, just like the Buddha, bodhisattvas will instantly manifest themselves in front of sentient beings and benefit them. However, shravakas and pratyekabuddhas choose to enter into nirvana too early, and after that, they cannot continue to benefit sentient beings. Similarly, due to the lack of wisdom, ordinary practitioners usually fail to seize the right moment to help others and as a result, they suffer setbacks more often.

In the Tibetan and Tang versions, there are two additional sentences: "To seek subtle wisdom of the Four Noble Truth but not to actualize it at the improper time: this is the practice of bodhisattvas. To seek spiritual achievement but not to abandon birth and death: this is the practice of bodhisattvas." So bodhisattvas do not seek spiritual realization and achievement at the improper time.

"Although one contemplates the dharmas as nongenerated, not to enter the primary status [of buddhahood]⁹: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

The primary status refers to the extreme of nothingness and cessation. Bodhisattvas contemplate all phenomena as empty, beyond generation and cessation, but they do not abide in the concentration of nothingness.

"Although one contemplates the twelve [factors of] conditioned generation, to enter the heterodox views: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although like shravakas and pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas contemplate the twelve links of dependent origination, they can have into various erroneous views while not being affected by any of them. Here the "heterodox views" mean all kinds of views. In Xuanzang's version, it is translated as "to be free from various views".

"Although one attracts all sentient beings, to be without the attachment of affection: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although bodhisattvas attract sentient beings by the four means, they do not cling to them and develop any affection towards them. As mentioned in the previous text, bodhisattvas do not

⁹ **The primary status** does not refer to buddhahood, but to the extreme of cessation.

have an affectionate view of compassion. Some people love their pets so much and spend lots of time taking care of them, but it would be much better if they can introduce them to the path of liberation, instead of holding any affection or attachment to them.

“Although one takes pleasure in transcendence, not to rely on the elimination of body and mind: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although bodhisattvas like to practice in solitude and to be far removed from mental afflictions, they do not enter into the extinguished state through the elimination of the body and mind. Some Dharma practitioners who have been in solitary retreat for many years seem to be afraid of communicating or interacting with others. Unlike them, although bodhisattvas enjoy practicing in tranquil places, they can still associate with living beings of various backgrounds to inspire them. This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

“Although one practices [throughout] the triple world, not to destroy the Dharma-nature: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although bodhisattvas can freely travel in the three realms, they do not destroy the Dharma nature. In other words, they always abide in the ultimate truth and are not apart from it. Some Dharma practitioners will be easily influenced by their external environments, despite their long-term practices in solitude. Bodhisattvas are not like this. Although they can engage themselves in all kinds of activities in the mundane world, their realization of the nature of the mind cannot be destroyed, but remain pure and unmoved all the time.

“Although practicing [the emancipation of] emptiness, to plant the host of virtuous roots: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

The next few lines talk about the practice of the three gateways to liberation, i.e., emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness. Although bodhisattvas have realized emptiness, they still cultivate all types of virtues. This is the practice of bodhisattvas. Some people think that they have realized emptiness, so they stop all virtuous practices such as chanting mantras or studying sutras. Also some Zen and Dzogchen practitioners believe that stabilized meditation is just good for them and they needn't conduct any other virtuous deeds. All these thoughts are indeed incorrect and disapproved by lineage masters. Even if one has attained the state of realization as high as Padmasambhava's, one still needs to accumulate merit little by little and to engage oneself in various practices such as studying, reflecting and reciting the Dharma

teachings, making light offerings, and doing prostrations. Even the bodhisattvas on the third bhumi will sacrifice their life for the sake of one four-line verse of the Dharma teaching. It'll be too absurd and ignorant for us to stop accumulating merit and planting any virtuous root.

“Although practicing [the emancipation of] signlessness, to save sentient beings: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although bodhisattvas have realized that all phenomena are absent of characteristics, and thus do not have any attachment, they would never give up benefiting sentient beings. As stated in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, “Bodhisattva-mahasattvas always engage in the practice of virtue in order to bring benefit to all sentient beings.” No matter how high level of realization bodhisattvas have achieved, they always practice virtues for the sake of sentient beings. As Mahayana practitioners, we should constantly keep the vow of bodhichitta and aspire to engage in the virtuous deeds of benefiting others even if we would die the next day.

“Although practicing [the emancipation of] wishlessness, to manifest the experience of a body: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although bodhisattvas have attained the emancipation of wishlessness, they still choose to take rebirth in samsara and benefit sentient beings through various skillful means. Never to abandon sentient beings, this is the practice of bodhisattvas. In *the Collection of Concluding All the Virtuous Deeds in Oneness*, it is said,

Contemplate the emptiness of all phenomena,

Yet not give up sentient beings.

Show compassion towards all sentient beings,

Yet not abandon the realization of emptiness.

So it is of great importance for us to cultivate both compassion and the wisdom of emptiness in our Dharma practices.

“Although practicing nonactivation, to activate all good practices: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

“Practicing nonactivation” is “without acting” in the Tibetan version, meaning on the ultimate level there is neither doer nor action. Although bodhisattvas have transcended these concepts, they still undertake all the virtuous practices. For example, despite their profound realization

on the emptiness of the perceiver and the perceivable, many great masters still activate all virtuous practices such as chanting mantras or releasing captive animals. This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

According to Master Huiyuan's commentary, the practice of wishlessness and nonactivation both belong to the third gateway to liberation, from the aspect of effect it is wishlessness and from the aspect of cause, it is nonactivation.

We should know that in the Mahayana and Shrivakayana traditions the intentions of certain behaviors can be quite different. Here is a story of the Buddha to illustrate this. Once there was a Brahmin who heard that making offerings to the Buddha could accumulate great merit, so he invited the Buddha and his disciples to his house to accept his offering. However, when the Buddha and his disciples arrived, nobody answered the door as the Brahmin totally forgot his promise. As it was too far away for the sangha to go back, they had to camp out. At that time, a groom offered the Buddha and his retinue the grains prepared for his horses. So the Buddha and his disciples ate those grains for three months. According to the explanation of the Shrivakayana teaching, this is because the Buddha once cursed someone "you are going to eat horse grains" in his casual stage, and now had to bear this karmic effects.

However, in *The Sutra of the Heap of Jewels*, we can find further explanations: The Buddha took this opportunity on the one hand to show the infallible law of cause and effect, and on the other hand, to benefit the 500 horses of the groom by receiving their offering. These 500 horses used to aspire to carry out bodhisattvas' deeds in their past lives and often made offerings to the Three Jewels, but later they were misled by a non-virtuous teacher and created negative karma that led them to the rebirth of horses in this life. Among the horses, there was a leader called Rizang who was a manifestation of a bodhisattva. The bodhisattva had encouraged them to generate bodhichitta in their past lives and again manifested as a horse in this life to help them. So Rizang told the 500 horses to confess their previous negative karma and to offer their food to the Buddha and the sangha. Therefore, although the Buddha knew that the Brahmin would forget about his invitation, he still came to the place so that the 500 horses could have the opportunity to offer their grains to himself and the sangha and thus purify their negative karma created in their previous life.

So generally speaking, if we read the stories of the Buddha according to the Shrivakayana teaching, we would say that they show us the infallible law of cause and effect, and the

Buddha himself also bear the karmic results. According to the Mahayana teaching however, we know that the omniscient Buddha certainly knows everything, and when it is the right time to inspire some sentient beings, the Buddha will manifest intentionally in a certain way. However, ordinary people can only see the Buddha's external behavior, and fail to understand his hidden intention.

“Although practicing the six paramitas (perfections), to universally understand the minds and mental attributes of sentient beings: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

These two parts don't have an adversative but a progressive relation. Bodhisattvas practice the six paramitas, and meanwhile they perfectly understand the minds and mental activities of all beings. Unlike shravakas who uphold pure precepts mainly for their own liberation, bodhisattvas practice the six paramitas for the benefits of sentient beings, and as a result, they can perfectly understand the minds and actions of all beings. “Mental attributes” refer to mental activities which also include the actions of sentient beings since one's actions always follow one's mind.

“Although practicing the six penetrations, not to exhaust the flaws: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although bodhisattvas have obtained six penetrations, i.e., the six supercognitions of the divine eye, the divine ear, knowing the minds of others, knowing one's own and others' past lives, performing miracles, and exhausting the defilements, they do not just abide in the exhaustion of the defilements. Rather, they stay in the defiled samsara to benefit all sentient beings. In the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*, it is said that bodhisattvas take delight in benefiting sentient beings, which is the utmost happiness that bodhisattvas attain from their miraculous power. As Mahayana practitioners, we should follow the footprints of bodhisattvas and cultivate a strong altruistic mind. Particularly when we go through illnesses or other ordeals, instead of worrying and feeling frustrated, we should think: “As long as I can benefit sentient beings, no matter how much suffering I have to bear, I accept it willingly.”

In the Tibetan and Xuanzang's versions, a few more sentences follow: “To live by all the Dharma, and to keep away from grasping any wrong paths: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.” “To contemplate the six recollections, and to be unaffected by any sort of defilement: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.”

“Although practicing the four unlimited states of mind, not to desire birth in the Brahma world: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

“Although practicing concentration, meditation, emancipation, and samadhi, not to be born [in a corresponding heaven] according to one’s concentration: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although bodhisattvas practice the four immeasurables, they do not desire to be born in the heaven of Brahma, which is the karmic reward of the practice of the four immeasurables. Likewise, although bodhisattvas practice concentration, meditation, emancipation and samadhi, they do not reincarnate in the form or formless realms by force of these concentrations and absorptions.

“Although practicing the four foundations of mindfulness, never to transcend the body, sensation, mind, and dharmas: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

The following text talks about the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment. Through practicing the four foundations of mindfulness regarding the body, sensation, mind and phenomena, shravakas attain enlightenment and enter into the extinguished nirvana. Bodhisattvas practice the same, but they do not transcend these four objects of mindfulness. Rather they rely on the body, sensation, mind and phenomena to benefit sentient beings. This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

“Although practicing the four right efforts, not to forsake exertion of body and mind: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Once shravakas have perfected the four right efforts of abandoning all non-virtues and adopting all virtues, they will stop making any more efforts. However, bodhisattvas will continue to be diligent in their spiritual practices and never forsake exertion of both body and mind.

“Although practicing the four supernormal abilities, to attain autonomy in numinous penetration: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Through practicing the four bases of miraculous powers pertaining to intention, diligence, attention and discernment, bodhisattvas have attained the unconstrained supernatural powers.

Shravakas are not like this. Although some Arhats such as Rahula and Kashyapa are still living in this world, they haven't attained the genuine autonomy in supernatural powers.

“Although practicing [in the context of] the five faculties, to discriminate the sharp and dull faculties of all sentient beings: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Shravakas perfect their own five spiritual faculties of faith, diligence, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom in their Dharma practice, but do not observe the faculties of others. Bodhisattvas not only perfect their own five faculties, but also discriminate the faculties of all sentient beings so as to give them proper teaching and guidance.

“Although practicing the five powers, to delight in seeking the ten powers of a buddha: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although practicing the five powers, bodhisattvas further take delight in seeking the ten powers of a buddha.

“Although practicing the seven factors of enlightenment, to discriminate buddha wisdom: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although practicing the seven factors of enlightenment, bodhisattva will continue to seek the Buddha's wisdom for the sake of sentient beings. However, shravakas are just satisfied with the attainment of the seven factors of enlightenment.

“Although practicing the eightfold noble path, to take pleasure in practicing the unlimited path[s] to buddhahood: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Both shravakas and bodhisattvas practice the eightfold noble path, but bodhisattvas further take pleasure in practicing the unlimited paths to buddhahood and benefiting numerous living beings.

“Although practicing concentration and contemplation, the auxiliary factors of the path, yet ultimately never to fall into extinction: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Shravakas practice concentration and contemplation, i.e., shamatha and vipashyana, and eventually enter into the absorption of cessation. However, bodhisattvas perfect the practice of shamatha and vipashyana and will not fall into the extreme of cessation, because they set a higher value on vipashyana, a deep insight on the emptiness of individuals and phenomena.

“Although practicing [with an awareness of] the nongeneration and nonextinction of the dharmas, to ornament one’s body with the [thirty-two primary] characteristics and [eighty subsidiary] marks: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although bodhisattvas realize the empty nature of all phenomena, which is neither generated nor extinguished, they still adorn their bodies with auspicious features. As Buddhists, even if we have accomplished the realization of the Great Perfection, we still need to dress up and behave properly. In *Satyaka-Niganthaputra Sutra*, it says,

Having realized the nature of all phenomena

Is extinguished, formless and without self,

He shows dignified appearance

For the benefit of all sentient beings.

It means that although the Buddha has realized the formless, selfless and wishless state of emptiness, he still shows dignified appearance for the sake of sentient beings. This is the reason that the Buddha ornamented himself with thirty-two major characteristics and eighty minor marks.

In this modern world, many people are face-judgers who put so much emphasis on facial attractiveness. Some Dharma teachers often tell lay practitioners not to dress luxuriously but to live a simple life. That is necessary if we want to control our desire and other emotional afflictions. However, since worldly people can only know about Buddhists from their external appearances and demeanors rather than their inner realization, it is important for both monastics and lay practitioners to dress in good attire and beware of the manners. The realization of emptiness should not be an excuse for Buddhists to be slovenly and untidy.

When Khenpo was young, there was an old monk in his monastery who liked dressing himself up and often quoted a verse from Mipham Rinpoche’s *A Treatise on Ethics for Kings*:

Therefore, the great bodhisattvas,

Though having no intention to dress up,

For the sake of guiding worldly people,

Appear in splendid array deliberately.

It means that bodhisattvas do not dress themselves up for their own purpose, but in order to inspire sentient beings to develop faith in the Three Jewels, they wear solemn and nice attire. This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

“Although manifesting the deportment of a shravaka or pratyekabuddha, not to forsake the Buddha-Dharma: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although bodhisattvas can manifest the deportments of shravakas and pratyekabuddhas, they do not give up the Mahayana practices and behaviors.

“Although being in accord with the ultimate characteristic of the purity of the dharmas, to manifest one’s body where needed: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although bodhisattvas abide in the state of primordial purity in accord with the ultimate truth, they manifest in various forms corresponding to different circumstances for the sake of sentient beings. Just like what is taught in the *Universal Door Chapter of the Lotus Sutra*, Avalokiteshvara has already realized the ultimate truth of purity and emptiness, yet he manifests thirty-two forms according to the preferences of sentient beings.

“Although contemplating the buddhas’ countries as permanently serene like space, yet to manifest the various pure buddha lands: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Although bodhisattvas realize the buddha lands as empty and tranquil, they still display various kinds of pure buddha lands to attract sentient beings. We can often find the detailed descriptions of pure lands in Buddhist scriptures, and some people wonder why Buddhists care about these beautiful ornaments if everything is empty. Indeed, bodhisattvas care about everything that is attractive to sentient beings. The manifestation of pure lands is exactly skillful means to guide and inspire sentient beings.

“Although attaining the enlightenment of buddhahood, turning the wheel of the Dharma, and entering nirvana, yet not to forsake the bodhisattva path: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.”

Although attaining Buddhahood and showing the Buddha’s twelve deeds such as turning the wheel of Dharma, entering nirvana and so on, not to forsake the path of bodhisattvas: this is the practice of bodhisattvas.

When [Vimalakirti] explained [the Dharma] in these words, eight thousand gods within the great assembly led by Manjushri all generated the intention to achieve anuttara samyaksambodhi.

Upon hearing the teaching, numerous gods within the great assembly led by Manjushri generated bodhichitta. This is the end of Chapter Five.