

**KHENPO  
SODARGYE'S**  
*Commentary on*



ORIGINAL VOWS OF  
**KSITIGARBHA  
BODHISATVA  
SUTRA**

**3<sup>rd</sup>**  
of 4 books  
2023 Edition

**ORIGINAL VOWS OF  
KSITIGARBHA BODHISATTVA  
SUTRA**

**3rd of 4 books**

Commented by Khenpo Sodargye

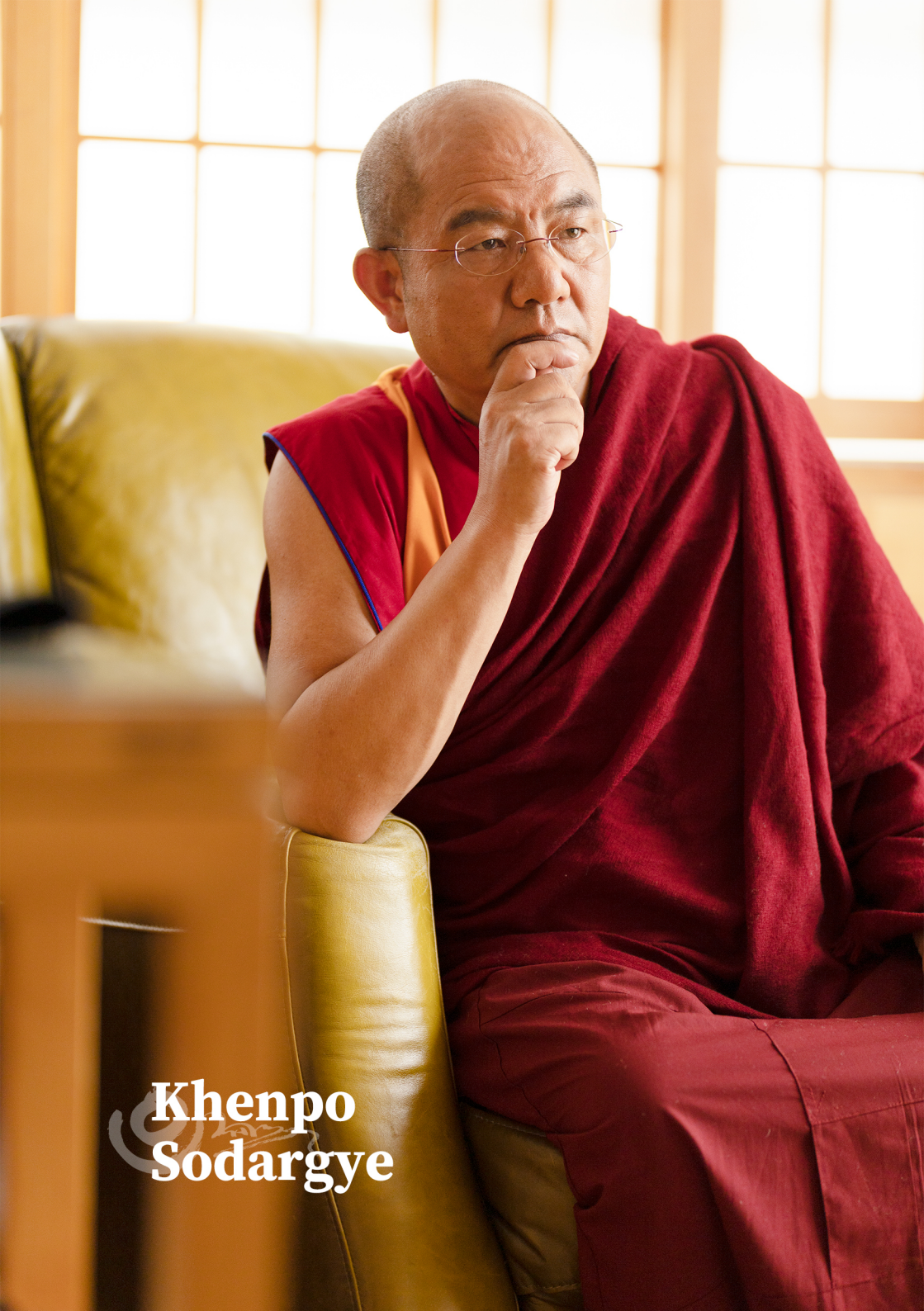
2023 Edition



Dedicated to

Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche in deep gratitude and love

May your compassion and wisdom illuminate everywhere  
and enlighten every sentient being.



**Khenpo  
Sodargye**

# Contents

## CHAPTER SEVEN

<b>BENEFITING THE LIVING AND THE DECEASED</b>	<b>2</b>
Lecture Fifteen	4
Efficacy Story: Practice Virtue with Bodhicitta . . . . .	4
Beings of Jambudvipa Always Commit Wrongdoing . . . . .	7
Benefit the Dying . . . . .	14
Benefit the Deceased . . . . .	23
Non-Virtuous Deeds Bring the Deceased Harm . . . . .	31
Perform Good Deeds While Alive . . . . .	36
Lecture Sixteen	43
Efficacy Story: A Non-Buddhist Saved by Ksitigarbha . . . . .	43
The Great Blessing of Names of Holy Beings . . . . .	47
The Impermanence of Death . . . . .	61
How to Make Vegetarian Meal Offerings on Behalf of the Dead? . . . . .	71



**CHAPTER EIGHT**

**THE PRAISE OF KING YAMA AND HIS RETINUE 78**

Lecture Sixteen (Continued) 80

The Gathering of King Yama and Measureless  
Ghost Kings . . . . . 80

Lecture Seventeen 87

Management and Interpersonal Relationship . . . . . 87

Efficacy Story: A Hunter Saved by Ksitigarbha . . . . . 96

Question from King Yama . . . . . 100

The Obstinate and Confused Person . . . . . 108

The Promise of Ghost King Evil Poison . . . . . 124

Lecture Eighteen 131

Heartfelt Advices for Practitioners at Larung Gar . . . 131

Efficacy Story: Ksitigarbha Saves Those Who Have  
No Faith in Him . . . . . 134

What Should Be Done at the Time of Birth? . . . . . 139

What Should Be Done at the Time of Death? . . . . . 154

Genuine Identity of Ghost King Presiding Over Life . . 169

**CHAPTER NINE**

**RECITING THE NAMES OF BUDDHAS 177**

Lecture Nineteen 179

Be Grateful, Diligent, and Relaxed . . . . . 179

Efficacy Story: A Fisherman Netted a Statue of Ksitigarbha . . . . .	184
The Request of Ksitigarbha . . . . .	187
Reciting the Names of Buddhas . . . . .	195
Benefit of Reciting Buddha Names . . . . .	219

**CHAPTER TEN**

**COMPARING THE CONDITIONS AND VIRTUES  
OF GIVING 226**

Lecture Twenty	228
Efficacy Story: Extend Lifespan by the Power of Ksitigarbha . . . . .	228
The Proper Attitude While Giving . . . . .	232
The Conditions and Virtues of Giving to the Poor . . . . .	237
How Should the Privileged Make Offerings? . . . . .	246
The Virtue of Helping Those in Need . . . . .	253
The Virtue of Making Offerings to Holy Objects . . . . .	261



## Chapter Seven

*Benefiting the Living and the Deceased*



In the bardo state, the consciousnesses of the deceased individuals desperately and constantly wish that their families would make merit for them. That is why it is necessary to conduct virtuous deeds on behalf of the dead.

—Khenpo Sodargye

# Lecture Fifteen

August 14th, 2020

## EFFICACY STORY: PRACTICE VIRTUE WITH BODHICITTA

Since you have participated in the Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly today, you may be a bit tired for the lecture tonight. I will try to finish today's teaching quickly. How about in just a couple of minutes? Just kidding, it is impossible.

I would like to start with a story from the *Records of Efficacy of Ksitigarbha Image*. In the Song Dynasty, there was a monk named Ding Fa in the Kong Guan Monastery, the name of which literally means the monastery of meditating on emptiness. Every month, Ding Fa painted several images of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. He prostrated and prayed in front of these images regularly, aspiring to see Ksitigarbha in person. He still had not seen any sign of Ksitigarbha after doing this for three years.

One day, a young guest monk came to the monastery and requested accommodation. Ding Fa went to greet him. The young monk said



to him, "Now your wish has been fulfilled. But why is your aspiration so limited?" After speaking those words, the young monk disappeared without a trace. When others learned of this incident, they commented that because of Ding Fa's limited aspiration to just seeing Ksitigarbha in person instead of seeking to attain liberation, the bodhisattva manifested as the young monk who disappeared after seeing Ding Fa to teach him a lesson. Ding Fa also realized that his aspiration was too limited and he then resolved to generate bodhicitta to achieve supreme enlightenment.

Later, Ding Fa had a dream and he heard a voice saying, "The young monk was me, Ksitigarbha. You only wanted to see me but you have not generated bodhicitta. Therefore, I came and urged you to arouse the supreme mind of awakening. Since you have painted a great number of images of me, this will free you from the three lower realms in all your future lifetimes. You will be reborn in the Tushita Heaven after this life. When Maitreya becomes the Buddha, he will prophesy your attainment of buddhahood. I will be always with you, like your shadow, inseparable from your body."

After he woke up, Master Ding Fa was so moved that he spent all his possessions to make a life-size statue of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, inside which he placed all the Ksitigarbha images he had painted before. Ding Fa frequently prostrated in front of this statue and

made offerings. Miraculously, the statue emitted light, a vivid evidence of the inconceivable blessing of Ksitigarbha.

Initially, Ding Fa only had the wish to see Ksitigarbha in person. Because of his sincere persistence, he received a direct instruction from Ksitigarbha which expanded his motivation to the great aspiration of bodhicitta. When we engage in any virtuous practice, it is important to persevere with the practice and tune our minds to bodhicitta. Initially, our motivation to benefit and enlighten all beings may be unnatural or forced, and difficult. However, as long as we continue to make such aspirations, our minds will be transformed and genuine bodhicitta will emerge.

# BEINGS OF JAMBUDVIPA ALWAYS COMMIT WRONGDOING



## Chapter Seven

### Benefiting the Living and the Deceased

At that time, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva said to the



**Buddha, “World-Honored One, I observe that the mental stirring and thoughts of living beings of Jambudvīpa are [almost] always wrongdoings. Although now and then they [may generate virtuous thoughts and] gain good benefits, they mostly retreat from their initial resolve. If they encounter evil conditions, in every thought they increase and add to [the unwholesome]. These people are as if walking in the mire and carrying heavy rocks. They would become more trapped and weighted down as their feet would sink deeper with each step. [...]**

This chapter mainly talks about two things as taught by Kṣitigarbha: how the alive gain benefits through the *Kṣitigarbha Sūtra*, and how the deceased gain benefits and liberation through this sūtra. In the previous chapter, the Buddha said that “the acts and thoughts of the beings of Jambudvīpa are invariably karma and wrongdoing.” Here Kṣitigarbha repeated the same words that the mental activities and thoughts of living beings in this world are always wrongdoing. If we examine ourselves carefully, we will find that virtuous thoughts such as loving-kindness, compassion, altruism, and faithful devotion do not often arise in our minds, while non-virtuous thoughts, such as greed, hatred, jealousy, arrogance, cunning, or deceptiveness appear continuously.

It is quite true that ordinary people create negative karma in almost every mental activity and action. Even though they may perform a

few virtuous deeds and gain some benefits, their virtuous thoughts would just disappear as quickly as a flash of lightning in the dark night. They often regress from their initial determinations due to obstacles in this life or their karmic obscurations from previous lives. If they encounter unfavorable conditions such as a negative friend, a bad circumstance, or a misleading book of wrong views, their negativities will increase in almost every thought and act, leading them to eventually fall into the lower realms. As it is said in Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*,

*Most people cling to  
An unwholesome direction,  
Thus most common beings  
Certainly go to bad rebirths.*

Because most people engage in unvirtuous deeds, they will fall into the lower realms after death. The six classes of sentient beings are distributed like a pyramid, with the lowest at the bottom and the highest at the top. The population in the hell realm is the biggest, next is the hungry ghost realm, and then the animal realm followed by the human being realm. The number of celestial beings in the four formless heavens, the highest heavens in samsara that require a high level of meditative attainment, would be a lot less than the 7.8 billion in the human realm.

In this human world, there are fewer people who are virtuous than those who are not. Among people who are virtuous, those possessing all eighteen freedoms and advantages for Dharma practice are even rarer. There are very few people who can study and practice the Buddha's teaching in the systematic way of listening, contemplating, and meditating. As the Buddha and Ksitigarbha described here, most people in this human world constantly create negative karma. Like those walking in a swamp and carrying heavy rocks, their feet would sink deeper with each step. The farther they go, the deeper they sink and the heavier the burden. There is no way for them to get out of the lower realms.

It is particularly true in this modern world, except for those who had auspicious connections with the Dharma in their previous lifetimes, most people will have difficulty proceeding with their Dharma practice. Their virtuous thoughts only appear occasionally and they have great difficulty in performing virtuous deeds. I would sometimes inquire about some of my old Dharma friends who once were quite diligent practitioners but are now preoccupied with many mundane issues and no longer spare time for Dharma practice. They are often worried and distressed by trivialities. Instead of making progress, some of them have even completely regressed from their previous practice. This makes me realize that

many people have great difficulties in making progress in their spiritual practice.

**“[...] If such a person can meet a virtuous friend, this person’s burden will be lightened or even completely removed, because such a virtuous friend has great strength. Furthermore, the virtuous friend will lend him support, advise him to keep his steps firm and steady, and point out that once he reaches the level ground, he should beware of the bad road and not walk on it again.**

If the person who carries a heavy burden in a swamp is fortunate enough to have a kind friend who has the power to help, his heavy load can be lightened or even completely removed by this friend. With the support and advice of this friend, this person would be able to take firm and steady steps forward and eventually reach level ground. Once there, he should take care to avoid walking again into the swamp.

In the same manner, for sentient beings carrying heavy burdens of karma and afflictions, it is very difficult to move forward on their own in the mire of samsara. However, if such a person fortunately encounters a virtuous spiritual teacher, his burdens of karma will be lightened or even completely removed. Relying on the teacher’s support and instructions, he will be able to arrive at a safer place.

As he realizes how much suffering he has experienced in samsara, he will resolve forever to be free from such a place of danger and torture.

We are just like the person who is carrying a heavy burden and mired in a swamp. If we have not met our gurus or virtuous spiritual teachers, we will sink deeper and deeper into the mire of samsara. We have already committed a lot of negativities in this present life. Without their guidance, we will continue to accumulate even more in future lifetimes. Fortunately, we have not only encountered virtuous teachers but we have also received precious instructions from them. There is hope that we will be able to free ourselves from samsara and attain ultimate liberation.

In the *Sutra of the Collection of All Virtuous Roots*, it says,

*We should approach virtuous spiritual teachers,*

*Who can obstruct our negativities*

*And teach us what the Buddha advocates.*

*They are those whom we should be close to.*

*They teach in accordance with the path of the Buddha,*

*Through which our virtues will be cultivated.*

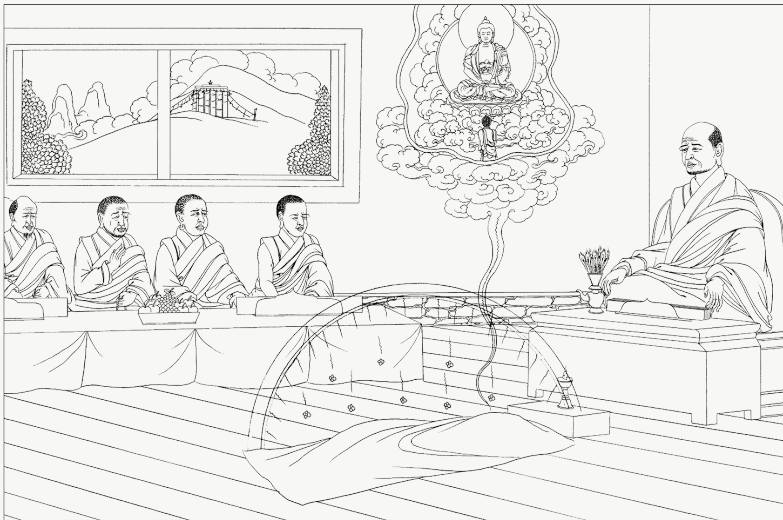
*Abiding in teachings of what we hear from them,*

*Our wisdom will be increased.*

Virtuous spiritual teachers can help us end our wrongdoings. Following their guidance, our minds can be tamed and transformed, and we will be able to attain both temporary happiness in the human and celestial realms and the ultimate benefit of liberation. We are truly fortunate to have encountered these virtuous spiritual teachers and been able to rely on them. We should cherish all their teachings and put them into practice.



## BENEFIT THE DYING



**“World-Honored One, living beings who are accustomed to evil begin with a minute amount then quickly escalate into measureless [evil]. Because these beings have such a habit, when they are about to depart this life, their parents and relatives should make merit in their behalf to assist them on the road ahead. This may be done by hanging banners and canopies and lighting oil lamps, by reciting the sacred sutras, by making offerings**

**in veneration to the images of Buddhas and holy ones, as well as by reciting the names of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and pratyek-abuddhas in such a way that the recitation of each name reaches the ear of the dying one and may be heard in his fundamental consciousness.**

Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva is well aware of the habitual tendencies of sentient beings in this world. They are often accustomed to committing negativities, starting with non-virtuous actions such as killing, stealing, lying, or divisive talk. They then create more and more negative karma until it becomes unconstrained. If these beings fail to purify their negativities when they are still alive, they will endure terrible suffering upon their death and their future lives will also be full of pain. Therefore, it is of great importance that their families and relatives make merit for them at the time of their death and after their death. By doing so, they could obtain a good rebirth and have an opportunity to attain liberation. Otherwise, since they have committed karmic offenses when they were alive, they would only continue with their habitual tendencies to create even more negativities and thus sink into the lower realms forever.

What types of merit could their family members make for them?

## Hang Banners and Canopies

The first virtuous practice for the dying is to hang banners, flags, and canopies. In Chinese Buddhism, the word *Fan* (幡), translated into banners in the text, is a collective name for all kinds of prayer flags and banners. Among them, Tibetan prayer flags are probably one of the most popular types. Tibetan prayer flags and Chinese prayer banners are slightly different. Some may think that a banner is just a rectangular flag. Yet, if it is just a piece of plain cloth with no name or mantra of buddhas or bodhisattvas printed on it, it would bring no benefit to the dying or the deceased.

According to the Chinese Buddhist tradition, most prayer banners would have the names of buddhas or bodhisattvas, such as “Namo Amitabha Buddha” or “Namo Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva” printed on them. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, prayer flags are commonly printed with the Amitabha mantra, Mani mantra, Vajrasattva mantra, and so on. Prayer flags hang everywhere in the Tibetan regions, especially in places for burial, such as crematories, charnel grounds, and rivers used for water burials. Tibetan people have the tradition of hanging a lot of prayer flags for the benefits of both the dying and the deceased.

Some may wonder if there is any scriptural evidence proving the benefits of hanging prayer flags or banners. In Tibetan Buddhism,

many such descriptions can be found in works of great masters such as Karma Chakme Rinpoche and Karma Lingpa. There are related stories in journals of traveling in bardo recorded by Mahasiddhas and Dakinis. Also, in many termas revealed by various great tertons, it is said that even the wind that flaps the prayer flags can enable one to attain liberation.

In Chinese Buddhism, there is a 12-volume tantra called *The Buddha Speaks of Abhisheka Sutra*, which was translated by the Kuchean master Po Srimitra in the Eastern Jin Dynasty. I have not yet found a Tibetan translation. This tantra has a similar statement: “Prayer banners flap in the wind. They will be blown into pieces and become dust in the end. By touching the wind that blows the dust, one will obtain immense merit.” Even the dust of prayer banners or flags can bring immense benefit to those who touch them.

Since sacred mantras or names are printed on prayer flags and banners, they are indeed the representatives of the Three Jewels and we should hang them in places that are clean and tidy. For instance, it is not good to hang them by the side of the road or at the door of a building because in these locations, people may easily step on the disintegrated pieces, which will cause them negative karma. During the time when I was in middle school, religious policy was quite restrictive and prayer flag hanging was not permitted. There was a person who slandered the benefit of hanging prayer flags

and burned them in public. This person quickly received severe retributions. He had many negative experiences even on the day he burned prayer flags.

## Light Oil Lamps

The second helpful practice is to light oil lamps for the dying. Traditionally, oil lamps were lit not only at one's passing but for forty-nine days thereafter. Regarding the number of oil lamps to be offered, it can be one hundred, one thousand, or even ten thousand lamps every day. The more the better. It is best to keep one or seven oil lamps lit continuously for forty-nine days. Or at least, oil lamps should not be extinguished until the dead body is disposed of.

## Recite Sacred Sutras

Family members can recite sutras such as the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, *Diamond Sutra*, *Pratimoksha Sutra*, and *Chanting the Names of Noble Manjushri* for the dying. In Tibetan regions, *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* is a must-recite tantra for the dying and the deceased. Reciting this tantra for forty-nine days after a person dies is a common practice for all Tibetans. People would make all efforts to invite monastics to recite this tantra for their deceased family members. Money and food are usually offered to monastics to support their chanting. If a poor person dies without any relatives, his neighbors or people in his village would voluntarily

collect money to do this for seven days, fourteen days, or twenty-one days. On the contrary, if a family has good income but does not follow this custom for the deceased, everyone would conclude that the family is not kind and it will definitely be criticized.

## **Make Offerings and Recite the Names of Noble Ones**

Other virtuous actions that would greatly help the dying include making offerings to buddhas, bodhisattvas, and great masters, and reciting the names of noble ones such as buddhas and bodhisattvas. As long as the recitation of these names reaches the ear of the dying, a virtuous root will be planted in his or her fundamental consciousness, alaya consciousness. Such a virtuous root will bring the dying great benefits in future lives and will eventually lead this person to liberation.

**“These dying beings, should the results brought about by the unwholesome karma they generated be reckoned, would certainly fall into the lower realms. However, by virtue of their relatives’ cultivating these noble causes in their behalf, their manifold [torments of] offenses can be dissolved. [...]**

Relying upon the virtues cultivated by their family members in their names, the offenses of the dying beings can be purified,

allowing them the opportunity to attain liberation. *The Buddha Speaks of Abhisheka Sutra* says, “If the deceased have committed negative karma that will cause them to be born in the eight circumstances that prevent true practice of the Dharma, the merit of hanging prayer banners and making light offerings will grant them liberation from these circumstances.” Therefore, whether we hang prayer banners and flags, make light offerings, or recite sutras and tantras such as *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, the dying will certainly gain benefits and be freed from their negative karma.

## The Thought upon Death

I would like to further explain how virtuous deeds can be beneficial for the dying. In Nagarjuna’s *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, it says, “Although practicing virtues the whole life, generating a non-virtuous thought at the time of death will cause one to fall into a lower realm. Although practicing non-virtues the whole life, generating a virtuous thought at the time of death will lead one to the celestial realm.” Therefore, what one is thinking at the moment of death can be a determining factor for one’s next life. With a good thought, one will take a good rebirth, while with a bad thought, one will have to take a bad rebirth. It is important for us to tune our minds to a virtuous state at the time of death.

In the same manner, the thought one has just before falling asleep could also impact one's dream. If you think too much before bed, you may find it hard to fall asleep or you may have a bad dream. If you fall asleep with a virtuous thought, usually you will have a good dream. I always pray to my guru H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche before going to bed, and thus maintain my mind in a virtuous and peaceful state. Normally my dreams are good and auspicious.

## Two Things to Be Avoided for the Dying

There are a couple of points that relatives of the dying should be aware of. According to the Vinaya teaching, when a person is dying, one should avoid saying any negative words to him, but should say something positive and encouraging. Statements such as "you have committed grave offenses and you will fall into the lower realms" should definitely be avoided. Instead, if one tells the dying person that "by the blessings of buddhas and bodhisattvas, all your offenses will be purified and you will head to a good rebirth," this person would be relieved from his worry and anxiety and have a nice new life.

Another point is not to cry in front of the dying person. Great masters all tirelessly exhorted not to cry out loud next to the person who is dying. As said in *Longshu's Pure Land Text*, "When one



suffers from severe diseases and is going to die, his relatives should neither cry loudly nor sigh anxiously in front of this person as it will disturb his mind and cause him to lose mindfulness.” When a dying person hears the people around him crying, he would be disturbed from his original tranquil state. In such cases, the person would mostly generate even stronger attachment to this current life and such clinging would lead him to a lower realm.

## BENEFIT THE DECEASED

**“[...] If relatives can furthermore widely perform many good deeds during the seven seven-day periods after the death of such beings, then the deceased will be able to leave the lower realms forever, be reborn as humans and devas, and experience excellent, wonderful happiness. The living relatives will themselves receive measureless benefits.**

### **Why Forty-Nine Days?**

Ksitigarbha emphasized that it is important to perform virtuous deeds for the deceased in a period of forty-nine days after their death, which will greatly benefit both the deceased and the living. Why should it be forty-nine days? According to Vasubandhu’s *Auto-Commentary on the Treasury of Abhidharma*, most sentient beings will spend forty-nine days in their bardo state before going to the next life. Yet, those with special karma may take a longer time. *A Forest of Gem in the Garden of Dharma* tells a story about a governor named Guo Quan in the Song Dynasty who had not been able to take

rebirth for more than 30 years after his death. Finally, he found his daughter and daughter-in-law and requested them to offer meals to thirty monks on his behalf. It is said that after the meal offering, he was freed from such karmic retribution and took rebirth. H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche once also said that in some Dakinis' travel journals in bardo, there are records that some people were not able to head to the next life for more than three years after their death.

Although forty-nine days are the general time length of the stay for sentient beings in bardo, there are cases that those with special karma cannot take rebirth within such a period of time. For example, just like the procedure of applying for a country's visa which may have a general duration of seven days, there could be applicants who would have to go through a special review process that could take a lot longer.

## Who Is King Yama?

In both Tibetan and Chinese traditions, King Yama is regarded as the chief judge in the human realm, evaluating all sentient beings' karma and determining their punishment in hell. King Yama and hells are not just myths created by our conceptual mind. As long as the karma of a sentient being leads him to take a rebirth in hell after death, he will see King Yama in person and experience the

suffering of hell as a result of the maturation of his karma and habitual tendencies. It is as if you are in a dream where you would have the same body you have in this life and engage in similar activities you do in your daily life; all of these scenes manifest merely on the ground of your habitual tendencies.

As a result of different habitual tendencies, King Yama appears in different forms in different cultures. Indians may see King Yama as an Indian with a beard or other distinctive features that only Indians possess. While Tibetans, Chinese, or people of other ethnicities may see King Yama as a person possessing features of their own ethnic groups. This is because different sentient beings have different habitual tendencies in their alaya consciousnesses. This is a very profound concept in Buddhism and I hope you will have the opportunity to delve into these teachings in depth. Once you develop a deep understanding of habitual tendency and alaya consciousness, most Dharma teachings will become clear to you.

## **Virtuous Practices for the Deceased**

It is crucial to perform virtuous deeds for the deceased within forty-nine days after their death. In my monastery, Dhomang Monastery, there is a building with ten prayer rooms particularly prepared for the deceased where local people can recite prayers for their deceased family members for forty-nine days. These prayer

rooms are used by different families daily throughout the whole year, regardless of spring, summer, autumn, or winter. Sometimes all rooms are occupied, sometimes two or three rooms are used. When I visited the monastery the other day, someone humorously introduced these rooms as the “Hotel for the Dead.”

As a whole, Tibetans tend to follow the tradition to make merit for the deceased and assist them on the road heading to next life. When a person dies, his family members, friends, and neighbors will perform various virtuous things for him to ensure that he has good merit to support his next life. They will print and hang prayer flags, light oil lamps, recite Buddhist scriptures, and make offerings to the Three Jewels. Everyone will practice virtues and accumulate merit on behalf of the deceased. This is different from the customs in many other places where people would only bring monetary gifts for the family of the deceased and then enjoy a luxurious banquet that usually serves meat, creating even more negative karma for the deceased.

During the famine in the late 1950s and early 1960s, conditions in most places did not permit the recitation of any prayer or the performance of any virtuous deed for the deceased. It was very difficult for the family that they had to quickly deal with the bodies of those who died of starvation. They were not even able to light a butter lamp or hang a piece of prayer flag for them. The ones who

survived all felt great remorse for not being able to make any merit for the deceased. When the situation finally improved, they did all they could to locate the remains of their deceased family members and performed Buddhist pujas for them so that they can still be blessed and gain merit for their next life.

These traditions and practices are not so common outside of Tibet. I suspect that most Han Chinese or Westerners have not heard of *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, not to mention inviting monastics to recite this tantra. They usually hold a funeral ceremony to memorize the deceased for a couple of days. Other than that, nothing more is done to help the deceased gain a better rebirth. At any rate, as you now study Buddhism and become Dharma practitioners, you should know how crucial it is to make merit for your deceased family members or friends. For example, you can invite a few monastics or lay practitioners to recite sutras and tantras such as *Chanting the Names of Noble Manjushri* or *The Ritual of Liberating the Dying and the Deceased* for forty-nine days. Some lay Buddhist groups voluntarily recite rituals and prayers for the dead. These are very meaningful practices for both the living and the deceased.

Knowing that it is important to perform virtuous deeds for the dying and the deceased, we, as Buddhists, need to put what we have learned into practice. When a relative or a friend dies, we

should use all our knowledge to make merit for the dead. It would be a pity that after learning all these teachings one would still not know what to do in real life. What Ksitigarbha has taught here is very much related to our daily life. It is truly important to engage in virtues for the deceased, such as reciting sutras, hanging prayer flags, making light offerings, or making tsa-tsas within forty-nine days after their death. We should keep these teachings in our minds and put them into practice as needed.

## A Story of Fan Zhongyan

Although performing these virtuous deeds seems quite simple, it can truly bring immense benefits to the dying and the deceased. In the last lecture, we talked about the story of a woman who was saved from the suffering of difficult childbirth by the virtue of making a Ksitigarbha statue. I want to share with you another story of Fan Zhongyan, the most prominent figures of the Song Dynasty, who saved his deceased mother by dedicating to her the merit of reciting the *Diamond Sutra*.

On the 21st day after the death of his mother, Fan had a vision of his mother in his dream, telling him that she was experiencing tremendous suffering in the bardo and that if she did not accumulate enough merit as soon as possible, she would fall into hell. She requested Fan to recite the *Diamond Sutra* to generate the

necessary merit for her. Fan Zhongyan was deeply shocked and woke up immediately. With tears welling up in his eyes, he bathed and observed the eight one-day precepts on his mother's behalf. Then he went to Xuanmu Chan Monastery to respectfully invite the monastics to recite the *Diamond Sutra* for seven days for his deceased mother.

On the night of the sixth day, he dreamed of his mother again, saying, "Your sincere devotion and virtuous deeds even moved the great bodhisattva Guanyin (Avalokiteshvara). He joined the monastics and recited half of the *Diamond Sutra* today. Now thanks to the great power of this sutra, my negative karma of previous lives has been purified and I will take rebirth in the celestial realm. You can go to the monastery tomorrow morning to find the manifestation of Guanyin, the monk who recited half of the *Diamond Sutra*."

Next day, the seven-day recitation of the *Diamond Sutra* was completed. Fan Zhongyan went to the monastery and made a grand offering to the monks who recited the sutra for his mother. He asked them respectfully, "Had any of you recited only half of the sutra yesterday?" The monks were all confounded and answered him, "We were required to recite the full sutra. Why would we recite only half of it?" Then, a monk standing beside the assembly said calmly, "When the monks were reciting the sutra yesterday, I



was standing on the side and recited silently. As I finished half of the sutra, you came to the monastery to make offerings, so I went back to the kitchen to continue my work. Now that you have asked, I will tell you honestly.”

Hearing his words, Fan Zhongyan realized that this monk was Avalokiteshvara and prostrated to him immediately. The monk replied, “Mo! Mo! Mo!” In Chinese it means please don’t do this. Then the monk suddenly rose high into the air and disappeared. Afterwards, as they learned that the monk was the manifestation of Avalokiteshvara, both monastics and lay people were full of devotion. In order to commemorate this special experience, Fan Zhongyan built the Mo Mo Chan Meditation Hall.

This story shows how indispensable it is to accumulate merit for the dying and the deceased. Relying upon the merit of reciting the *Diamond Sutra*, Fan’s mother was able to be reborn in the celestial realm. This is also a vivid example that shows many people, including prominent figures, would turn to religions for help when they encounter special situations. In the end, they would need to accept the existence of situations such as bardo and reincarnation, and then rely on the power of the Three Jewels to gain liberation.

## NON-VIRTUOUS DEEDS BRING THE DECEASED HARM

“Therefore, in the presence of the Buddha, World-Honored One, as well as devas, nagas, and others of the eight classes of beings, humans, non-humans, and others, I now exhort living beings of Jambudvīpa to be careful—do not kill, harm [beings], generate evil conditions, or worship and offer sacrifices to ghosts and spirits, or seek the help of goblins on the days when someone is nearing death. Why? Your killing, harming, worshipping, offering sacrifices, and so forth are not the least bit helpful to the deceased, but bind up conditions of wrongdoing so that they become deeper and more severe. If in this life or in the future the departed one gains elements of holiness and is to be reborn among humans or devas, but because his relatives commit these evil causes [for his sake] when he is on the verge of death, he will become involved in dispute and be delayed from being reborn in an upper realm. How much worse the situation will be

for the dying persons who never had even a few roots of goodness from their lifetime! Each of them will undergo the lower realms in accordance with his own karma; how can he bear to have relatives add to that karma? It is as if there was a person who had traveled from afar. He had been out of food for three days and carrying a load that weighed more than a hundred kilogram. Suddenly he came upon a neighbor who attached a few more things to it. He would be even more burdened then.



Ksitigarbha continues to urge beings of Jambudvīpa not to do improper things that will create more offenses for the deceased. One should avoid killing because it creates severely negative karma for both the deceased and the living. In 1995, His Holiness Jigme

Phuntsok Rinpoche was sick and stayed in the Pidou District of Chengdu for a long time. People there had a special custom to memorize the deceased. They beat gongs and drums at the funeral ceremony. When burying the dead body, they would kill a chicken at the burial grounds to make animal sacrifice. Such action is brutal and not only brings no merit for the dead, it further increases their negative karma. The *Dharmapadavadana Sutra* says, "If one wants to gain merit through killing, it only keeps merit far away." It is impossible to accumulate merit through killing and such thought is truly mistaken.

Other things that beings of Jambudvīpa should avoid are worshipping and offering sacrifices to ghosts and spirits or seeking the help of goblins. All these actions are not only the least bit helpful to the deceased but will only increase their burden, like adding fuel to the fire, bringing no benefit to the deceased at all. The deceased are already suffering terribly from the retribution of various offenses they have committed themselves. It would be worse if their relatives and friends create even more negative karma for them.

Imagine the merit a deceased person has accumulated when he was alive or the merit made by his relatives on his behalf is sufficient to allow him to take birth in Amitabha's Pure Land, become a bodhisattva, or at least take rebirth in the human and celestial realms. However, his family members decide to make sacrificial

offerings for him when he is on the verge of death. As a result, he will become embroiled in disputes with the sentient beings that have been killed by his family members on his behalf. King Yama will then have to judge whether he needs to be responsible for the retribution of killing or not. The actions of his relatives have brought him non-virtuous karma and thus potentially compromising the corresponding effects of his virtuous karma. He could have attained good rebirth and liberation, yet the negative karma created by his relatives on his behalf could prevent this result from happening. This is similar to a prisoner who has tried his best to earn the credits to get an early release, yet because of the negative actions taken by his relatives or friends on his behalf, early release has become less hopeful. Although his relatives all had a good intention, instead of helping him, they have made things more complicated and brought him negative consequences.

If even sentient beings with virtuous karma may not be able to bear all the negative karma their relatives could add to them, how would those beings with almost no virtue be able to handle it? Their own negative karma is already heavy enough to push them to fall into the lower realms. It would get worse if others accumulate even more negative karma on their behalf, such as killing, including making animal sacrifices. In some spiritual traditions, sheep and cows are buried together with the deceased as burial objects. In

ancient times, even human beings were buried alive with the dead ones as human sacrifice. These actions are indeed horrendous and unacceptable.

Ksitigarbha used an analogy to further explain this concept. A person carrying an extremely heavy load had traveled from afar and had not eaten for three days. It was getting very difficult for him to continue to walk. Unexpectedly, his neighbor appeared and asked him to carry some additional objects, further burdening him. Likewise, the dying person is already burdened with a lot of negative karma, his situation would only become worse if his relatives add even more negativities to him. Their actions not only do not relieve his suffering, they could make his liberation even more unreachable. It is a pity that in many places people still follow these bad customs and accumulate severely negative karma for the deceased.

## PERFORM GOOD DEEDS WHILE ALIVE

**“World-Honored One, I see that as long as living beings of Jambudvīpa are able to follow the teachings of the Buddhas, or even just perform good deeds as little as a strand of hair, a drop of water, a grain of sand, or a speck of dust, they themselves will gain all the benefits.”**

Ksitigarbha speaks of how to gain benefits for living beings of Jambudvīpa. If they are able to perform even very small virtuous deeds in accordance with the Buddha’s teachings, accumulating merit by relying on the object of the Three Jewels, they will gain all the benefits generated from their virtuous deeds, no matter how small they are.

### **Cherish the Freedom to Practice the Dharma**

It is essential to engage in virtuous practices when we are alive. We cannot rely on the virtues others perform for us after our

death. We may have asked our family members to recite prayers for us for forty-nine days after we die. However, it is never certain whether others would be able to arrange these things or not because everything is impermanent and unreliable. As the old saying goes, “Out of sight, out of mind.” They may completely forget everything after we die, or there are no allowable conditions for them to do that. Therefore, while we are still alive in this world, we should accumulate as much merit for ourselves as we can.

In this regard, we should not ignore any small virtuous deed. For instance, lighting one butter lamp, offering one stick of incense, making one prostration, reciting the six-syllable Mani mantra once, chanting the name of a buddha once, or paying homage with one hand, all of these bring us incredible benefits, as long as our minds abide in a pure state. Meanwhile, we should avoid any non-virtuous deeds, no matter how small they are. For example, in front of noble beings or representatives of the Three Jewels, we must avoid negative thoughts such as aggression, anger or jealousy. Otherwise, we will create very negative karma that can bring us immense suffering.

In Master Yongming Yanshou’s *Treatise on the Common End of Myriad Good Deeds*, it says, “If in the merit field of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, one can perform virtuous deeds as little as a strand of hair, he will possess grand merit no matter



where he takes rebirth. Such merit is inexhaustible.” So it is of great significance and benefit to perform virtuous deeds in the merit field of the Three Jewels, no matter how small they are. If we do not act now, we may not have a chance to accumulate the same merit in the future, because all phenomena are impermanent and favorable circumstances of both ourselves and external environment for practicing virtues can disappear suddenly. There is a verse from *Compendium of the Teachings Sutra* which I personally quite like. It goes like this:

*All happiness has its end,*

*All loved ones have to be apart,*

*All lives will come to die.*

*Please learn and practice the Dharma while still alive.*

It tells us how important it is to learn and practice the Dharma when we have the opportunity. Life is short, we should not delay our Dharma practice with a myriad of excuses, “I am too busy now”, “I am too tired now”, “I am in a bad mood now”, “I am not in good health”, and so on and so forth. When impermanence strikes, it will be too late for us to realize the truth of impermanence and that nothing can be relied on.

Because of our ignorance, we ordinary people often do not notice that all phenomena keep changing moment by moment. Rather,

we perceive them as permanent. This is our delusion and without Dharma practice, we will not be able to break free from such deluded ignorance. We regard a bottle we saw yesterday exactly as the same one we see today. We consider the bottle permanent and fail to realize that what we have perceived is just a continuum of similar appearances. This shows us how blind we are to the true reality of all phenomena. This is what we need to overcome by engaging in Dharma practice.

## **Master at Least One Dharma Practice in This Life**

Not long ago, I visited several monasteries and nunneries which were affiliated with Larung Gar. I told them that as Dharma practitioners, we should at least grasp one Dharma practice in this life and develop a personal experience from it. Whether it is impermanence, emptiness, or guru yoga, we need to rely on it to transform our minds. Of course, it is best if we are able to master all Dharma practices and apply them to ourselves. If we cannot do it, we must at least master one practice and we must never lose faith and devotion in the guru and Three Jewels.

Some practitioners claim that they have great faith in their guru. But they should examine themselves using the tantric teachings and the words of great masters of the past. The term “guru” has

different meanings in the traditions of Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. In Vajrayana, it is inappropriate to think the guru as like the Buddha; instead, the guru is truly the Buddha, the two of whom have no difference. In Mahayana, the guru is considered as a bodhisattva. In Theravada, the guru is a qualified Dharma teacher to whom one should pay reverence. Thus, different vehicles have different definitions of a guru, which directly indicate the level of faith that practitioners of different vehicles should possess in their guru.

We may think we have strong faith toward our guru and the Buddha, but our faith may not necessarily be genuine. We need to closely examine whether we have the confidence and irreversible faith that are deeply rooted in our hearts and bones. If we keep our practice only on papers and in words, then we will sadly not be able to apply the Dharma teaching in actual life when we truly need it.

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, a great number of people were forced to stay at home. Many of them, including some Dharma practitioners, found that their fear and anxiety were triggered by lockdowns. This could be due to a lack of Dharma practice in their daily life. If we master just one or two Dharma practices, we will be able to confront difficulties and life's challenges on our own.

Even at the moment of death, we will be able to stay calm and not experience too much suffering.

As long as we continue our efforts in Dharma practice, we will for sure make progress because the Buddha and his teachings do have such blessing and power. Yet, if we lack sincere faith and remain distracted when engaging in Dharma practice, even if performing virtuous acts as small as a strand of hair or a speck of dust could be beneficial, it would not be enough to eradicate the root of samsara when we are not mindful nor sincere in these actions.

Therefore, it is extremely important that we drive ourselves to practice the Dharma diligently when conditions are favorable and available. Everyone should and can gain certain benefits from the Dharma in this short life. Learning the Dharma is important, but what is even more important is to practice the Dharma gradually and constantly. Although performing virtuous deeds such as reciting a sutra is a Dharma practice, the genuine and ultimate Dharma practice is to observe the mind and to realize its nature. By doing so, we will be able to eliminate all our mental afflictions. This is the best and most profound Dharma practice that each of us should aspire to engage.

# Lecture Sixteen

August 17th, 2020

## EFFICACY STORY: A NON-BUDDHIST SAVED BY KSITIGARBHA

We will continue with the seventh chapter, *Benefiting the Living and the Deceased*. This chapter mainly talks about how the deceased and the living can benefit from the Ksitigarbha practice. As usual, I will share with you a story about the blessing of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva.

In the Song Dynasty, there was a town called Liao where there had been around one thousand households originally which gradually increased to some two thousand. The residents were mostly Mahayana followers and had strong faith in Avalokiteshvara and Ksitigarbha. They held in high esteem the *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha* and *The Avalokiteshvara Sutra*, the latter of which is more widely known as the *Lotus Sutra's Universal Gate Chapter*. There was an old monastery in the town in which three shrine halls were erected on its three sides. In the middle shrine hall, Buddha

Amitabha was worshipped, and in the left and the right shrine hall Avalokiteshvara and Ksitigarbha were worshiped, respectively. The statues of the two bodhisattvas were the same height and that of Amitabha was about twice as high. They were all very efficacious statues, and auspicious signs often appeared when people prayed to them.

One time, an epidemic struck the town and took the lives of many people. In order to stop the epidemic, the town mayor went to the monastery and prayed sincerely before the statue of Ksitigarbha. While he was praying, light emitted from the statue and shined upon the whole town. People who were infected recovered quickly and those who died young were resurrected. There was a girl who was a believer in a worldly god and died of the epidemic. One day after her death, she revived. Immediately after she regained consciousness, she went to the monastery, paid homage to the Ksitigarbha statue, wept, and asked for ordination. As the monk wondered why such a request came from a non-Buddhist believer, the girl recounted what happened after her death.

She said, "After my death, I was seized by evil ghosts. In great fear, I prayed to the god I used to worship for protection. But when a monk appeared, the god was so scared that he forsook me and ran away. Then the monk said to me, 'Ignorant as you are, you do not follow the Buddhadharma yet take refuge in a worldly god,

now you see he is not able to save you. I am Ksitigarbha from your local monastery. Under the request of the town mayor, I have come to save you and bring you back to life. Since my statue is built in the town, it is my duty to protect the residents. I do not subdue these evil ghosts because they can remind people of subduing their non-virtuous thoughts. These evil ghosts manifest from nothing but your own negative karma. They have no substantial entity but are just your own karma. Now that you know this, when you go back to the living world, you should refrain from negative thoughts and wrong views, renounce the secular life, and take Buddhist ordination so as to live a pure life.” After hearing her words, the local people all rejoiced in her and the monks in the monastery agreed to her request for ordination.

When man-made or natural disasters such as the present pandemic strike, or when we are challenged by all kinds of difficulties, both physically and mentally, if we pray to Ksitigarbha wholeheartedly, all negative conditions will be transformed and all obstacles will be dispelled. Praying to Ksitigarbha is especially indispensable in such a special time when the entire world is dispirited by various disasters, the Coronavirus pandemic in particular. If we read the news, we will notice that we seem to be threatened by more and more uncertainties. Faced with such difficult circumstances, it is



particularly important for us to pray to Ksitigarbha to avert all negative influences.

The statues I gave you the other day have two sides. One side is the image of Buddha Shakyamuni, and the other side is the image of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. Although there are many forms of Ksitigarbha, the image I chose was the one His Holiness once prayed to. At its bottom, the Chinese characters of “Namo Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva” are carved. I do worry that some would try to profit by selling the same statues and advertising their products using my words. Since there is no difference among the various forms of Ksitigarbha in terms of his blessing, there is no need to purchase a statue that is identical to the one I offered to the Han sangha. Furthermore, since it is inconvenient at present for us to mail things from the valley, for those outside who are interested in purchasing a Ksitigarbha statue, you may purchase it online, or as I had suggested earlier, find a nice picture of Ksitigarbha on the Internet and make a copy of it. It does not matter whether the image or statue is of the Tibetan or Han tradition, just choose the one you have the most faith in. It is necessary for all of you to have a Ksitigarbha image in your home shrine as your object of veneration.

## THE GREAT BLESSING OF NAMES OF HOLY BEINGS



As these words were spoken, in the assembly there was an elder named Great Eloquence. This elder had long since attained nonarising; he taught and guided living beings of the ten directions [to the other shore]. Manifesting in the form of an elder,

**he joined his palms in respect and inquired of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, “Mahasattva, after beings of Jambudvīpa die, and their family and relatives cultivate virtues for their sake, make vegetarian meal offerings and so forth, planting many good causes, will these departed ones gain great benefits and release?”**

After Ksitigarbha had spoken about the virtuous deeds the living ones should perform for the deceased and how the deceased would benefit from these deeds, an elder in the assembly called Great Eloquence asked another question to Ksitigarbha. From his name, we could presume that the elder was very skillful and apt in debates. Although appearing as an ordinary lay practitioner instead of a realized great bodhisattva, he actually is like Vimalakīrti who had realized emptiness a long time ago. He has been engaged in many activities that have benefited sentient beings from the ten directions and helped guide them to liberation. Throughout the history of Buddhism, there are many great masters who appeared as lay practitioners but engaged in numerous activities that benefited others.

Elder Great Eloquence asked that when a person of this world dies, for example, one’s parent, and the whole family and friends perform a myriad of virtuous deeds for the deceased such as making offerings of meal and other things to the sangha, freeing captive lives, lighting butter lamps, reciting sutras, building stupas,

practicing the six paramitas such as generosity, discipline, patience and so on, would these acts bring the deceased considerably great benefits? What level of release would the deceased gain?



**Ksitigarbha replied, “Elder, now through the Buddha’s awesome [spiritual] power, I will explain this in general terms for the sake of all living beings in the present and future. Elder, beings in the present and future who hear a Buddha’s name, a Bodhisattva’s name, or a pratyekabuddha’s name on the days when they are nearing death will gain release regardless of whether they have offenses or not.**

**“If there are men and women who did not cultivate good causes but committed many offenses while they were alive, and after**

**their death their family and relatives make merit and benefit in their behalf, they will receive one-seventh of the virtues of the holy deeds, and the other six-sevenths will benefit the living relatives themselves. Therefore, good men and good women in the present and future should themselves cultivate [virtue] when they are healthy and hearing well. They will receive every part [of the benefit].**

Here, Ksitigarbha gave a reply through the Buddha's miraculous power, for the sake of all beings then and ever after. According to Ksitigarbha, when people are near death, if they hear a buddha's name such as "Namo Shakyamuni Buddha", "Namo Amitabha Buddha", "Namo Ratnasikhin (Jewel Heap) Buddha", "Namo Medicine Buddha", or if they hear a bodhisattva's name such as "Namo Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva", "Namo Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva", "Namo Manjushri Bodhisattva", or even if they just hear a pratyekabuddha's name, they will gain liberation no matter if they had accumulated severe negative karma or not.

For those who have not performed any virtuous deed during their lifetime but instead committed many negative deeds, if their family and relatives perform virtuous deeds on their behalf after their death, they will receive one-seventh of the merit and the other sixth-seventh would accrue to the living. Ksitigarbha appealed that we should try to cultivate our virtues while we are healthy

and have all of our six senses so that we can receive every portion of the generated merit.

## **Benefiting the Dead by Chanting the Names of Buddhas**

I would like to emphasize several important points. First, as I have always said, it is extremely important to offer prayers, particularly chanting the name of Buddha Amitabha, when a person is dying or right after a person dies. This could help the dying person concentrate on the name of Buddha Amitabha and gain rebirth in Sukhavati. For ourselves, we should chant the name of Buddha Amitabha frequently and make it a daily practice in order to gain rebirth in Sukhavati when we die.

Reciting the name of Buddha Amitabha can bring us immense benefit. *Collection on Rebirth* edited by Master Lianchi, recounts a number of stories of people who took rebirth in Amitabha's Pure Land. In one story, Zhang Shanhe, a butcher who lived during the Tang Dynasty, slaughtered cattle his entire life. When he was dying, he saw in his karmic experience many cattle coming to take his life. He was very terrified and said to his wife, "Please immediately invite a monk to help me repent my negativity of killing." The invited monk said to him, "According to *The Sutra on Contemplation of Buddha Amitayus*, when faced with terrifying

scenes on your deathbed, as long as you can wholeheartedly recite 'Namo Amitabha Buddha,' you would still be able to take rebirth in the Pure Land." The man accepted the monk's instruction and said, "Since I may fall into hell at any moment and I do not have time to get an incense burner, I will just use my hand to hold the incense." So facing west, he held the fire in his right hand and the burning incense in his left and he started to recite the name of Buddha Amitabha wholeheartedly. After no more than ten recitations, he said that Buddha Amitabha was coming to pick him up, and passed away in peace.

When a person is dying, recitation of the name of Buddha Amitabha would bring virtue and peace to the person's mind and provide a virtuous cause for his next life. As we have said in the past, it is very important to maintain a virtuous mindset when one is near death. If a dying person generates a negative thought upon death, although he or she may have led a virtuous life, it is still unlikely for this person to gain a higher rebirth. This is because the state of mind at the time of death is the most critical and it can be the turning point deciding which direction the dying person will go, in other words, whether to take rebirth in a higher or a lower realm.

Therefore, at the time of death, family members around should be extremely cautious and try to create a peaceful and virtuous

atmosphere for the dying by performing virtuous deeds to help the dying person remain in a tranquil and positive state. Do not do anything that would provoke negative emotions in the dying person. For example, fighting over the assets of the dying person, expressing immense grief, or crying. All of these behaviors are detrimental to the dying because he or she will become upset or even irritated. All these negative emotions could drag the person to a lower realm.

There is an ancient sutra called *Nagasena Bhikshu Sutra* from around the first century B.C. This sutra has two editions, the north edition and the south edition. The south edition is named *The Milindapanha* or *Questions of Milinda*, a highly valued sutra in the Theravada tradition. The north edition is found in the Chinese Tripitaka with two translations by unknown translators. Compared to the south edition, the content of the north edition is shorter and thus incomplete. Overall, this sutra is held in high esteem worldwide and has been translated into many languages. The sutra is about the dialogue between King Milinda and the monk Nagasena. One of the topics covered in this sutra concerns a conversation on samsara and the law of cause and effect.

King Milinda said, “You say that a man who has lived an evil life for a hundred years can, by thinking of the Buddha at the moment of his death, be reborn among the gods; and that a



good man can, by one bad deed, be born in hell. These two things I do not believe.”

“What do you think, O king. If a tiny stone is cast into the water, will it float or will it sink?” asked Nagasena.

“It will sink.”

“What about a hundred big stones in a boat? Will the boat sink?”

“No.”

“It is because of the boat that the hundred big stones don’t sink. Similarly, although a man has committed evil deeds, by thinking of the Buddha which is the boat that keeps him afloat, he can be free from falling into hell and take rebirth among the gods. The tiny stone that sinks into the water represents the evil deed the man does, without ever knowing the Buddha or Buddhist teachings, the man will directly fall into hell after death.”

Therefore, our state of mind at the time of death is very decisive for our rebirth. No one knows when and in what way we will die. Death may come as a result of accidents such as car accident, or natural disasters such as earthquakes. When it happens, very likely we would not be able to concentrate on complicated visualization.

Therefore, a shortcut to ensure rebirth in the pure land is very important to employ. You should visualize your consciousness going up your vertex and merging into the heart of Buddha Amitabha or Padmasambhava who are sitting atop your head. This would help you gain a noble rebirth. If the death is from natural causes and there is enough time to think, try to stay away from any negative thoughts because they can drag you directly to a lower realm.

## **Both the Living and the Dead Gain Merit**

Second, it is stated specifically in this sutra that the dead would receive only one-seventh of the merit when an act is performed by the living. Although this is not stated in many other scriptures, it does not mean that this is incorrect since each sutra has its specific emphasis and may sometimes contain hidden meanings. In certain scriptures as well as in some pith instructions, it is stated that if the living performs virtuous deeds on behalf of a deceased and dedicates the merit to the deceased, the deceased would get all the merit generated from the virtuous deeds. There are also other references claiming that the deceased would reap only half of the merit or three-tenths of the merit.

These apparently contradictory statements are likely intended to deliver different intentions or hidden meanings. For example, if

the living performs virtuous deeds sincerely and wholeheartedly in the hopes of freeing the deceased from suffering and helping him attain peace and happiness promptly, then the deceased should gain immense benefit. However, if the living is cavalier in performing these virtuous deeds, then the dead would still by the power of interdependency gain some but less benefit.

According to the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, if we recite the Mani mantra 70,000 times for the dead, then the dead would gain the merit of reciting 10,000 Mani mantra, and the living one who does this for the dead would gain the rest. As long as we recite mantras or prayers for a deceased, we will most certainly receive benefits. As Patrul Rinpoche said in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, “Dissolving your own obscurations on someone else’s cushion.” It means that if those who perform ceremonies could make every effort to focus their body, speech, and mind on love and compassion for the suffering being, although they have been invited to benefit the suffering being, they will achieve a twofold accumulation both for themselves and for the others at the same time. According to the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, it would seem we would be the biggest beneficiary ourselves while performing virtuous deeds for the dead.

## Practice the Dharma Diligently

Third, we should be diligent in the actual practice if all favorable conditions are present. Engaging in virtuous deeds should never be delayed. We should not count on having others perform Amitabha phowa (transference of consciousness at the time of death into a pure land) for us, or perform prayer chanting for us, or perform other virtuous deeds for us when we die. At that time, as Patrul Rinpoche quoted from Padmasambhava in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, “By the time empowerment is being given to the memorial card bearing your name, it is too late! Your consciousness, already wandering in the intermediate state like a dazed dog, will find it very hard to even think of higher realms.” If we fail to gain the conviction in liberating ourselves from samsara through practice while we are alive, and instead rely only on someone else to transfer our consciousness to the pure land after our death, there is significant risk of failure. That is why we should take advantage of our precious human existence to practice the Dharma, diligently engaging in practice while we are alive and have the freedom to do so.

The prerequisite to effective engagement in Dharma practice is to first listen to the Dharma and to contemplate the teaching so as to gain conviction in the Dharma. That being said, learning the Five Great Treatises is absolutely necessary because for those of us

who tend to conceptualize everything, without using the sword of the wisdom and the power of the Dharma, our distorted views and negative habits that are rooted in our mindstream cannot be penetrated. On the other hand, if we are satisfied simply with just listening and contemplation of the Dharma and do not engage in actual meditation, then the Dharma would not be able to guide us across to liberation.

Therefore, to each and every practitioner here, it is essential that you listen to and contemplate the Dharma diligently, and more importantly, you need to put it into practice. Engaging in actual practice means that no matter how long you have spent learning the Dharma here, when you leave this place someday, you need to have assimilated at least one Dharma teaching into your being. Just as an old Tibetan saying goes, “Words are the ones you bear in mind; food is that which you carry in your clothes.” No matter where you go to pursue the Dharma, you should aim to internalize at least one Dharma teaching and use it to transform your mind. If you have already spent ten or even twenty years seeking the Dharma but are still your old self without any positive change, your extended stay in such a holy place is meaningless because you have not really gained anything.

Obtaining and mastering the Dharma is a must and the core of learning the Dharma. As I see it, no matter where we pursue the

Dharma, it will not be an easy thing as we may face obstacles and pressure from finance, family, physical health, and so on. If we are simply acting like a tourist, taking snapshots of the scenery along the way, and arguing and debating with other Dharma followers now and then without converting our obstinate mindstream, then there is no meaning in pursuing the Dharma. Many practitioners in the past had been just ordinary people before they pursued the Dharma but they became realized beings after finishing their studies. To them, it was a fruitful journey. Likewise, when we pursue the Dharma, we should strive to better our mindstream. The same goes to online listeners who receive the livestream teaching or those who follow teaching records. If you treat a Dharma teaching as if it is just a secular lecture, such as a corporate training course, and promptly forget about the content afterwards, you will not derive any actual benefit from it.

No matter what Dharma we learn, it is important to understand the essence of the teaching and put it into actual practice. If we are satisfied with only the theoretical understanding, then the teacher's words and those of the great masters will only remain theirs and the Dharma will remain distant to our minds so that we will still be dominated by the same destructive emotions as before. Although a simple theoretical understanding of the Dharma is still a meritorious act that can plant virtuous seeds in our alaya

consciousness, the power of these seeds is very limited and they may take kalpas to ripen into virtuous results.

As we live in this lifetime and follow the Mahayana teachings, especially the precious tantric teachings, we should strive to gain the conviction of liberation. I do not mean that you must gain freedom over living and dying. In Khenpo Yonga's *Commentary on Ascertainment of the Three Types of Vows*, he quoted the teaching from the *Kalachakra Tantra* which stated that "Beginners should not perform the conduct of yogins. Yogins should not perform the conduct of mahasiddhas. Mahasiddhas should not perform the conduct of the fully awakened." This means that each practitioner should act in accordance with his own realization. Since it is difficult for an ordinary practitioner to achieve the realization of a mahasiddha, a bodhisattva, or a buddha within this lifetime, it would be a mistake for us to try to act like a highly realized being. If our mindstream is no different from an ordinary person's mental state but we act like we were a great yogin or a mahasiddha, there would be an inconsistency between our view and our conduct which may result in a failure for the Dharma to produce a positive influence on our mindstream. Therefore, it would be important to engage in Dharma practice diligently and gain the conviction of liberation while we are endowed with all favorable conditions.

## THE IMPERMANENCE OF DEATH

“The great ghost of impermanence can come to one at any time. The consciousness [of the departed one] then wanders in darkness, not knowing how his offenses and merits [will turn out overall]. During the ensuing seven seven-day periods, he is as if stunned and deaf, or he is at various authorities being examined and questioned regarding his karma and the effects. Once the result is determined, he undergoes rebirth in accordance with his karma. In the time before [his rebirth] is determined, he is tormented by thousands of myriads of worries. How much more anguished will he be if he falls into the lower realms! Throughout the seven seven-day periods, in every thought the departed one who has not yet undergone rebirth hopes that his parents, children, and relatives will engender the strength of merit to rescue him. After these [periods of] days, he will undergo the ripened effects according to his karma. If he is a wrongdoer, he will pass through hundreds of thousands of years without a day



**of release. If his offenses include [any of] the five great violations that lead to incessant torments, he will fall into that great hell and for thousands of kalpas, and for an interminably long time undergo manifold sufferings.**



The great ghost of impermanence can come to anyone at any time. When it strikes, the consciousness of the departed will enter the bardo and wander in darkness. During the forty-nine days of the intermediate state or the bardo, he would not know how his positive and negative karma would balance and what particular result the karma would produce. They are as ignorant as a poor mute and deaf person. Or, during this time, in his own karmic perception, he would be examined and questioned by the Lord of

Death and his subordinates regarding his karma in order to decide which one outweighs the other. After examination and debates, if positive karma outweighs negative karma, the consciousnesses will take rebirth in a higher realm. If negative karma outweighs the other, he would take rebirth in a lower realm. During the time when his rebirth is pending, his consciousness would experience thousands of worries and anxieties. But the magnitude of suffering in the bardo would be greatly eclipsed by the suffering that awaits him if he falls into a lower realm.

Within the bardo, the departed would all hope to have their families and relatives perform virtuous deeds on their behalf to increase their merit and their chances of being rescued. After forty-nine days have passed, they will receive their sentences according to their karma. If they are judged to be sinners, for hundreds or thousands of years, there would be no deliverance from the three lower realms of suffering. If they had committed any of the five crimes with immediate retribution when alive, they will fall into the Avici Hell and suffer for thousands of kalpas.

## **The Great Ghost of Impermanence Can Come at Any Time**

I personally feel the sentence “the great ghost of impermanence can come to one at any time” contains profound meaning. There

is no guarantee that any one of us would be alive and healthy tomorrow. For some who are living a vigorous life today, tomorrow death may catch them unprepared and take them to a completely unfamiliar world. As an old saying goes, “Young and old, all are equal in Death.” So youth is not something to boast of given the impermanence of death and being young does not mean one is further away from death. In *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, it says,

*We cannot trust the wanton Lord of Death.*

*The task complete or still to do, he will not wait.*

*In health or sickness, therefore, none of us can trust*

*Our fleeting, momentary lives.*

The Lord of Death is unpredictable as he comes to us regardless of whether we are sick or healthy and regardless of whether we have purified all our negative karma and gathered enough merit or not. It will never say, “Ok. I will come to you after you finish this job.” To many, death would come suddenly when they still have many tasks unfinished.

Contemplating the impermanence of death is a supreme practice in Buddhism and it is of great importance for everyone to engage in such a practice. Personally, I have focused on this practice and I have a deep conviction in impermanence. I now look at everything from the perspective of impermanence, and I am confident that

when faced with significant events of impermanence in my life that I will be able to accept them with the most ease and readiness. As we contemplate impermanence, we should strive to be well-prepared for the coming of death at any time. In the *Sutra of the Sublime Dharma of Clear Recollection*, it says,

*Steadfast ones constantly think of death.*

*Death cannot possibly be halted.*

*Remembering one's impending death*

*Is praised as the supreme mindfulness.*

Just like Master Yin Guang who hung the word “death” in his room as a reminder, wise people should constantly contemplate death. Contemplating impermanence and death is one of the supreme Buddhist practices. As it is said in the *Nirvana Sutra*, and also quoted by Mipham Rinpoche in his *Gateway to Knowledge*, “Just as among the footprints of all living beings, no footprint surpasses that of an elephant, so too is the thought of impermanence paramount among all thoughts.” From this, we can see the importance of contemplating impermanence and death.

We should be well-prepared for the occurrence of impermanence at any time in any way. I am confident that I have made such preparation for death or anything else that may happen in my life. When impermanence strikes, I will not be shocked, nor complain

about why it is happening to me. Instead, I will face and deal with it with a positive attitude. Why? Because I have gained the certainty that the great ghost of impermanence could come to me at any time in any manner. We never get to make an appointment with him. He always comes unexpectedly. Impermanence serves as a useful reminder for us to take every opportunity we have to practice the Dharma.

## **The Intermediate State of the Bardo**

As we read from the text, in the bardo state, the consciousness of the departed is ignorant and is tormented by all kinds of worries. Such state is like that of a criminal suspect who is being held in detention before his trial. I know of criminal suspects who have been held in detention for several years, without receiving a trial or being released. The duration of their detention kept being prolonged for reasons such as a need for further investigation and so forth. Some of them may prefer a jail sentence because the psychological effects of extended uncertainty can be devastating. It is the same with the consciousness of the dead in the bardo. One would be eager to know where his karma will lead him even if it is to fall into hell because an extended state of uncertainty could be unendurable.

Not everyone experiences the intermediate state of the bardo. There are two types of people who won't enter the bardo. The first type is

those who have committed severe negative deeds such as the five crimes with immediate retribution and the offenses in the tantric tradition that would lead one directly to the vajra hell. After they die, their consciousnesses fall into hell immediately without any intermediate state. The second type is those with high levels of realizations. For Vajrayana practitioners who have accomplished the practice of Trekcho, when they die, they abide in the nature of the mind instantly. Except for those with the keenest faculty, most practitioners of Trekcho would hardly notice the fleeting moment of bardo, as it is described in the *Lama Yangtik*. Except for these two types of people, most ordinary beings will enter the bardo after death where they experience the suffering of unknowing and myriads of worries and anxiety while waiting for the trial with the Lord of Death and his subordinates.

In the bardo state, the consciousnesses of the deceased individuals desperately and constantly wish that their families would make merit for them. That is why it is necessary to conduct virtuous deeds on behalf of the dead. Tibetan people attach great importance to this practice. If a family member dies, even though the household is very poor, they will still try their best to perform as many virtuous deeds as possible for the dead. They believe no matter how destitute the household is, the living can still find a way to survive, but the dead is not able to do anything on his own to help

himself. Therefore, the living must help the dead by any possible means.

When performing virtuous deeds on behalf of the dead, it is necessary to write down the names of the dead no matter whether it is within the forty-nine days of their death or not. For example, if you offer a sum of money to the sangha and ask them to recite prayers or to perform Amitabha phowa for the dead. It would be important to write down their names so that the sangha can read their names out loud during the ceremony. Even if it is for your grandparents or those of your ancestors who died many, many years ago, it is still necessary to do it so that the sangha can read their names when chanting prayers for them. Even if a deceased had unfortunately taken rebirth as a hungry ghost or a hell being, by reading out his name, he will have a better chance to be liberated from the lower realms. This is the infallible power of interdependency.

I always write down the names of my deceased family members when I donate money to the sangha to chant prayers for them. But I have noticed some Dharma friends often neglect to do this. Writing down the name of the dead is not only valued in Tibetan Buddhism, but it is also a tradition in Han Buddhism. *The Buddha Speaks of Abhisheka Sutra* says, “Call upon the name of the deceased and perform various virtuous deeds on the deceased’s behalf.” So

it is important to write down or call out the name of the deceased when we perform virtues for them. If no family member conducts virtue on the dead's behalf, Tibetan people often say, "This family must be very poor as no one actually mentions the name of their dead family member." So when a family member or a friend dies, we should write down their names and try to ask the sangha to recite prayers and perform phowa for them every day within the forty-nine days after their death. This is particularly beneficial and necessary for the dead.

## **Be Mindful and Vigilant of Our Actions**

While we live in this world and enjoy all kinds of freedoms, we should try to avoid creating grave negative karma because there will be unimaginably horrible retribution. But it is likely inevitable for people to commit various negative actions due to their ignorance and the lack of the knowledge of the law of cause and effect. For the followers of Buddhism, we should at least try to avoid any grave negative action such as any of the five crimes with immediate retribution. In order to accomplish this, we need to control our afflictive emotions and be always mindful and vigilant of our actions. Otherwise, we could fall into hell directly.

Vajrayana practitioners need to be even more cautious with your samaya vows. According to tantra, if one violates samaya vows



such as disrespecting the vajra teacher, insulting vajra brothers and sisters, abandoning love for sentient beings, and revealing secrets to those who are unworthy, the consequence of such violation will be much more severe and terrifying than falling directly into the Incessant Hell. Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* has detailed descriptions of empowerment and samaya. If we read this treatise, the consequences of violating samaya vows should really concern us. Non-believers may take this as a pure legend that will never happen to them. To Buddhist followers, however, if one claims to be a hardcore believer of the principle of cause and effect yet violates it in their own conduct, then the only explanation for this paradox is that this person must be under the control of his or her own negative karma.

The world today is becoming increasingly degenerate and people's afflictive emotions have grown stronger. We have seen people commit some of the five crimes with immediate retribution such as killing one's parent. Once fallen into the Incessant Hell, the suffering these wrongdoers would experience would be unimaginable and totally different from the hunger, cold, mental depression, or even a serious illness that we are familiar with. No suffering in the human world can compare with it, not in the slightest. Therefore, we must be mindful not to commit any grave crime.

## HOW TO MAKE VEGETARIAN MEAL OFFERINGS ON BEHALF OF THE DEAD?

“Furthermore, Elder, after the death of such a being with wrongdoing karma, his parents, children, and relatives may make vegetarian meal offerings to help him in his karmic path. In the process of preparing such a meal and before that offering is completed, rice rinsings and vegetable leaves should not be thrown onto the ground, and before the food has been offered to the Buddha and sangha, no one should eat it. If there is any transgression or laxness in this matter, the departed one will gain no strength from it. If purity is diligently maintained in making the offering to the Buddha and sangha, the departed one will receive one-seventh of the benefit.

“Therefore, Elder, if after the death of parents and relatives, living beings of Jambudvīpa are able to make vegetarian meal

**offerings in their behalf with diligence, sincerity, and a resolute mind, they will benefit both the living and the deceased.”**

**As these words were spoken, thousands of myriads of millions of nayutas of ghosts and spirits of Jambudvīpa who were in the Trayāstrimsa Heaven all gave rise to the immeasurable bodhi mind. Elder Great Eloquence made obeisance and withdrew.**



If the families of the dead want to make vegetarian meal offerings to the Buddha and the sangha for the dead to purify his negative karma and help him accumulate merit on his karmic path, the sutra gives specific instructions on how to make these meal offerings. First, during the preparation of meals and before the offering is completed, nothing should be thrown away or wasted randomly,

not even small vegetable leaves or the water used to rinse the rice. Instead, they should be stored in barrels temporarily. Second, no one should eat the food before it has been offered to the Buddha and the sangha. If someone sneaks even a tiny taste of the offering, the dead will not receive any benefit. For those who are diligent in fulfilling the two aforementioned requirements and offer clean and pure food to the Buddha and the sangha, the dead shall receive one-seventh of the merit.

So beings of this world should make vegetarian meal offerings to the sangha when their parents or close ones die. When making these offerings to the sangha on behalf of the deceased, a sincere and pure attitude is essential. Without it, even a big sum of money does not necessarily bring significant merit. With a sincere and pure attitude, even if the money spent is very little, both the dead and the living ones will receive immense benefits. If making one meal offering to an entire sangha is too much to afford for a person, one can contribute financially to meal offerings to the sangha on important days, such as within the forty-nine days after their death, on their death anniversary, or during big Dharma gatherings.

When Ksitigarbha bodhisattva finished his words, all of the countless deities and ghosts of Jambudvīpa in the Dharma assembly resolved to realize the mind of bodhicitta. Elder Great Eloquence paid his respect and withdrew.

As always, whenever I talk about the merit of making offerings, whether it is for meal offerings or other offerings to the sangha, my audiences tend to be very enthusiastic about it. Unfortunately, there may be certain individuals who take advantage of their enthusiasm and instead solicit money for themselves. Given such a situation, I am always cautious about talking about accumulating merit through making donations. Some lay practitioners are very generous with making donations. If I talk about the merit of building Buddhist statues, they would immediately get excited about gathering virtue through it. They would transfer money to online accounts claiming to build statues without carefully confirming whether they are legitimate. After the money has been collected, the accounts would disappear along with the money. There are many online thieves today so I want to remind you to be very careful with any message about collecting money for the sangha. Except for the official account that accepts offerings and is overseen by the sangha, any other account deserves your careful scrutiny.

Also, there are individuals who constantly organize donation drives for the sangha. Such behavior not only causes people to have a negative impression of Buddhists but also brings a negative influence on Buddhism. Offerings should be made based on a voluntary basis. In addition, given the current political environment,

I would suggest that lay practitioners not organize donations of any kind as it may bring trouble to the related people. Whatever virtuous deed we perform, we should follow local regulations and conventions. Anyone who is willing to perform virtuous deeds should do it on his own and there is no need to persuade others to do so.

There are those who seldom engage in any virtuous activity but keep telling others to do so. This is unnecessary. Buddhist practitioners should all know what virtuous deed they should perform instead of having someone else tell them. Every practitioner has the capacity to perform virtuous deeds and should perform them based on their own situations. It is no exaggeration to say that those people who only persuade others to make donations are almost robbing others' money for alms giving. Such actions are certainly not appropriate nowadays. Buddhists should be mindful of how their actions would reflect on the image of Buddhism.

What is worse is that there are individuals who never perform virtuous deeds on their own and yet constantly go about collecting money in the name of a guru. This is something I really feel strongly about. Although I have repeatedly said not to collect any money in the name of a guru or a monastery, I discovered just a couple of days ago that there are still individuals among the audience who are doing this. These people may be paying no attention to the

teaching while specializing in the collection of money in someone else's name. Among them could be a few who are doing this with an altruistic intention, however, the majority are likely seeking self-benefits that are driving their collection efforts. People who are truly altruistic will give others the freedom to accumulate merit based on their own capability instead of persuading them into doing it. For those who take advantage of my teaching on making offerings to the sangha for self-benefits, I want to remind you of the consequences of these actions and urge you to be careful in this regard.



## Chapter Eight

*The Praise of King Yama and His Retinue*



Those who do good deeds and worship the images of Ksitigarbha or other buddhas and bodhisattvas will be greatly respected by all ghost kings. They will revere this kind of people just as they do for the buddhas of the past, present, and future.

—Khenpo Sodargye

# **Lecture Sixteen**

**(Continued)**

**August 17th, 2020**

# THE GATHERING OF KING YAMA AND MEASURELESS GHOST KINGS



## Chapter Eight

### The Praise of King Yama and His Retinue

At that time, from within the Iron Encircling Mountains, King Yama and measureless ghost kings all arrived at the Trayastrimsa Heaven and came to where the Buddha was. They were Ghost

King Evil Poison, Ghost King Many Evils, Ghost King Great Quarrels, Ghost King White Tiger, Ghost King Blood Tiger, Ghost King Red Tiger, Ghost King Disseminating Disasters, Ghost King Flying Body, Ghost King Lightning Flash, Ghost King Wolf Teeth, Ghost King Thousand Eyes, Ghost King Beast Devouring, Ghost King Rock Carrying, Ghost King Presiding Over Depletion, Ghost King Presiding Over Calamities, Ghost King Presiding Over Food, Ghost King Presiding Over Wealth, Ghost King Presiding Over Domestic Animals, Ghost King Presiding Over Fowls, Ghost King Presiding Over Beasts, Ghost King Presiding Over Goblins, Ghost King Presiding Over Birth, Ghost King Presiding Over Life, Ghost King Presiding Over Illnesses, Ghost King Presiding Over Danger, Ghost King Three Eyes, Ghost King Four Eyes, Ghost King Five Eyes, King Qi Lishi, King Daqi Lishi, King Qi Licha, King Daqi Licha, King A Nuozha, and King Da'a Nuozha.

There were great ghost kings such as these, each with hundreds of thousands of minor ghost kings. They all reside in Jambudvipa, and each of them has duties to carry out and preside over. Through the awesome spiritual penetration of the Buddha and the strength of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva, these ghost kings and King Yama all came to the Trayastrimsa Heaven and stood to one side.

We continue with the eighth chapter of the sutra. We learn that the Lord of Death, also known as King Yama and numerous ghost kings also came to the Trayastrimsa Heaven. The text gives a long list of these ghost kings. Some commentaries provide a detailed introduction of every ghost king, but I am not sure if they are from valid Buddhist scriptures, or maybe there are different explanations. For this lecture, we will not introduce all of them one by one. We will just focus on a selected few.

Ghost King Rock Carrying always carries a rock on his back due to his karma and feeds on wild beasts. Ghost King Presiding Over Depletion exhausts quickly the property of a household or the money in your wallet. So if your money runs out very quickly, this ghost might be hiding in your wallet. Ghost King Presiding Over Calamities oversees all kinds of disasters such as car accidents. Ghost King Presiding Over Food often lives in the kitchen. Ghost King Presiding Over Birth is often seen in the gynecology and obstetrics departments.

Each of these ghost kings has hundreds of thousands of small ghost kings coming with them, and they all live in our world, Jambudvīpa. Each of them has their own administration and duties to perform. They all came to the Trayastrimsa Heaven by the miraculous power of the Buddha and Ksitigarbha. The scene must be pretty fearsome with all these ghost kings present.

What we need to know is that there are many beings living together with us in this world who are invisible to our naked eyes, including but not limited to ghosts, maras, intermediate consciousnesses, rakshasas, and nonhumans. From this we can see that the Buddhist description of the world is very thorough and complete. It not only describes what we can see and perceive in this world, but it also introduces us to beings and things that are invisible to us, including past and future lives, heavens and hells, ghosts and spirits, and other beings in the six realms that we cannot see with our naked eyes or think of with our dualistic thoughts.

To some materialists, they deny the existence of ghosts and spirits because such beings are not mentioned in their science textbooks. Even when they are discussed in a classroom, they are taken as only existing in mythology or superstition. This is irrational. They are real creatures that exist around us and I do not think it is necessary to deny them. It is impossible to deny their existence and science cannot provide any valid evidence to prove the nonexistence of ghosts and spirits. Instead, many people have either seen them in person or heard others encountering them. We can sometimes get a sense of their existence in our nightmares. Ghosts and spirits do live everywhere around us, and if we offer incense and recite mantras for them, they will be greatly benefited and may even be liberated.

Mr. Xie was a teacher at my school and he would often speak about the nonexistence of ghosts and spirits. Although I had not learned about Buddhist logic at that time, I always debated with him on this point as I firmly believed their existence. Because of this, Mr. Xie often criticized me by saying words like, "There must be something wrong with your thinking. If you keep thinking this way, you will have no future, no accomplishment!" Since he was the one who was teaching me, it would not be very polite for me to disagree with him publicly. When people hold different views toward something, it would be inevitable to have heated discussions. However, we should focus on the question itself and not attach it to people personally. I am not sure if Mr. Xie is still alive. Maybe he is listening to this lecture right now.

**At that time, King Yama knelt on his knees, joined his palms, and said to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, it is through the awesome spiritual penetration of the Buddha and the strength of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva that the ghost kings and I are now able to come to this great assembly in the Trayastrimsa Heaven. We can therefore gain wholesome benefits, too. Now, there is a little question that I dare to ask the World-Honored One. O World-Honored One, with your kindness and compassion, please expound on it."**



King Yama said to the Buddha respectfully that they have come to this great Dharma assembly through the miraculous power of the Buddha and the blessing of Ksitigarbha. Normally, ghosts are occupied with their own affairs and are rarely able to attend such a Dharma teaching. This was indeed a rare and blessed opportunity. King Yama then proceeded to ask the Buddha to, with his kindness and compassion, answer a question he had.



# Lecture Seventeen

August 18th, 2020

# MANAGEMENT AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

Before our lecture today, I would like to say a few words regarding the management of the Han sangha here at Larung Gar. For all khenpos and khenmos, when you are supervising the sangha, you should use both the standardized rules and humane considerations. That is, try to follow the rules while allowing sufficient flexibility that enables a humane consideration of specific cases. This is the principle to follow. It is applicable also to the administration of any organization.

## **Be Humble and Compassionate**

In most western societies, everything is usually governed by laws and regulations. Because personal relations are highly valued in many eastern societies, there seems to be more flexibility in applying rules. In some cases, this could lead those in charge to overuse their power and make decisions arbitrarily through personal and subjective judgment. This is certainly not good.

However, an inflexible adherence to only rules and regulations without considering the specifics of a case is also flawed.

Recently, I saw a number of cases where some of our monastic supervisors had failed to deal with properly. Even though they said that they had followed the regulations, I really question whether the regulations were even reasonable. For example, there is a rule stipulating that anyone who comes back to the academy two months after the beginning of a new semester would be dropped from their original class and would have to re-enroll in another class as a new student. Then someone comes back after two months plus one day and the supervisor directly asks the student to re-enroll, without investigating any reason behind the absence. This is too rigid and inflexible. Of course, the supervisor is following the rule and the decision is not groundless. However, I think we can relax the requirement in such cases and have more consideration for the person involved because this is not a transgression of basic principles.

It is important for managers to have a sense of appropriateness and know when and to what extent regulations should be applied. Without rules, an organization will be in disorder. But to be bound entirely by rules, without leaving any room for adjustment on a case-by-case basis, would be oppressive and impractical. Therefore,

regulations should allow some flexibility, especially on small issues that do not violate our core principles.

I hope khenpos and khenmos would learn more about management in addition to giving Dharma teachings. When you manage other people, try not to be so rigid and inflexible with regulations. Try to consider all the factors and make reasonable allowances for individuals. If we had adhered rigidly to all the rules in the past, some of you would not have been able to stay here, not to mention becoming khenpos or khenmos. When you first arrived here, you were far from faultless. It was impossible to just command you to avoid every single small mistake.

My point is that we need to have compassion when managing others. Certainly, if a person crosses the red line or breaks the monastic precepts, that person should be expelled with no exceptions. In other cases, monastic supervisors should never casually expel someone from our academy based solely on their own decision. Everyone here, monastic or lay practitioner alike, lives not an easy life as each one has abandoned his secular life to spend all his time in Dharma study and practice. You should kindly remind someone of the rule if he violates it for the first time. If he breaks the rule over and over again, then probably he is not a fit for this monastic environment and you may consider letting him go.

Meanwhile, do not be arrogant when you are managing others. Some who are in charge sometimes behave like a high official, setting themselves above their subordinates. This is not the attitude of a great leader. A great leader is one who devotedly serves the masses. However, some Dharma practitioners, although they have been trained to follow the Mahayana path, still consider themselves superior to other people just because they may have a title or have been appointed as a manager or a group leader. Management of either the sangha or any group needs both wisdom and compassion. If a manager has both, the result will be satisfying.

## **Interpersonal Relationship**

Life today, in both the East and West, relies on communication and cooperation. It is not like in the past when people could live more or less on their own, by farming or herding, without much association and exchange with others. Now, in any community such as schools, companies, monasteries, and so on, there is a division of labor that makes the whole group function properly. This division of labor has become indispensable. People take on different roles and responsibilities and have to work closely with each other to make progress on their projects. High interdependency requires leaders to be able to effectively manage not just their own teams but also possess good communication skills that are needed to coordinate and work effectively with their peer groups.

That is why it is important to select the right person for a management position, a decision that requires wisdom. Sometimes, people appoint others based on personal relationships, without considering their capability, expertise, and character. These decisions will inevitably lead to problems. For those who have been appointed to leadership positions, you need to know how to conduct yourselves properly and treat all you deal with in a professional and respectful manner.

We have all seen some people who are welcomed wherever they go and every group they associate with speaks highly of them. Whereas others seem to only bring trouble and disturbance, and leave a bad reputation wherever they go. This can happen in both lay and monastic groups where there have been individuals who had seemed to be qualified but actually turned out to be not only unfit but also bring many troubles for the group they stay.

Good leaders make everyone, their superiors, colleagues, and subordinates feel pleased and motivated. Even if they are in charge of hundreds or even thousands of people, each team member knows what he or she has to do and gets along well with each other. Their groups cooperate well with other teams. In contrast, ineffective managers deliver poor team performance because they often put themselves above others or are unable to lead and motivate even a small group of just several people. Poor performance could lead

the team members to complain and blame each other, making other groups even more reluctant to cooperate with the team.

Since management effectiveness can lead to great differences in outcome, everyone should reflect on, “Have I done well in my position? Have I built a good relationship with everyone I associate with?” To build a good relationship with others requires skills and those who do not have these skills can annoy everyone they work with, from their superiors to subordinates to peers. Although rare, such cases have happened here at Larung Gar. His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche established a rule that according to the root samaya of Vajrayana, any such fight or quarrel is to be reconciled before the next day. If this is not promptly resolved, expulsion could result and these individuals will no longer be allowed to receive tantric teachings or empowerments.

Although there is no great hostility among people here at Larung Gar, some are doing quite poorly at interpersonal relationships. Some individuals also like to find faults in others. No matter where they are, even in a very small group of a handful of people, they would cause mischief. I have often said that if people in a Dharma center like to gossip, this center must lack the real Buddhist study of hearing, contemplating, and practicing the Dharma. If a center focuses on Dharma study and practice, people there will always

revolve around Buddhadharma and the noble truths of the world, scorning all worthless chatter and gossip.

I feel that I have done well in managing and interacting with others. Whether at Larung Gar or elsewhere, there is no one with whom I have bad relationship. I respect and have worked with many groups of people, with or without religious beliefs. I have established good channels of communication with every department or group I have cooperated with.

As a Tibetan saying goes, “The excellence of the son should be commended by others, not his own father.” When a father speaks highly of his son, it is of no meaning. It is the praise from others that truly shows the son’s ability. The same holds true for our behaviors. Some Dharma practitioners believe they are good and easy-going people but have no idea how others think of them. They should figure this out and reevaluate themselves. It is always important to do self-evaluations, especially for Dharma practitioners and those in charge. Reflecting on yourself from time to time and ask, “How is my relationship with others? How well do I attend to my team leader and how well do I care for my subordinates?”

I want to stress this before the lecture but maybe I have already taken too much time. If there is time, I could have continued on the topic of interpersonal relationship and management for



a couple more hours. Anyway, I will stop here. It's enough for today. Everyone here is wearing a mask. I can only see your eyes and foreheads and I feel that you all look quite adorable. Do you agree?

## Seek Liberation

While studying the Dharma every day, it is pivotal to aspire for liberation. Whenever we engage in virtuous deeds, the Dharma study or else, we should remind ourselves that "I am a seeker of liberation." This is how Dromtonpa used to spur himself to be an authentic practitioner, a true renunciant. It is recorded in Chengawa Lodro Gyaltzen's *Open the Door to the Training of the Mind* that, Dromtonpa used to stay in a solitary place, trying to shun worldly people. Sometimes, he would abide secretly somewhere in the cypress forest and mutter to himself, "I am a seeker of liberation. I shall not bind myself to reputation and offerings."

Even though we are not as accomplished as Dromtonpa, we are all following in the Buddha's footsteps in seeking liberation. Therefore, we should not be concerned with the eight worldly preoccupations, like reputation, wealth and so on, but rather see them as transient as fleeting clouds. To completely renounce those matters all at once may be difficult because we have a habitual attachment to them due to our past patterns of life. Nonetheless, keep in mind that

mundane success and prosperity are like plantain trees, devoid of any essence. The *Mahayana Compassionate Pundarika Sutra* says,

*Meritorious rewards of humans or gods*

*Are akin to a swift whirlwind.*

*They will not last*

*Like moon reflection in the water.*

Due to one's past merit and virtues, one can be born among humans or gods, enjoying all kinds of happiness and success. But such meritorious rewards are like a sudden gust of wind that will soon disappear. They appear but will not persist. They are devoid of any real essence, like the moon's reflection in the water. So think about it: What have I been pursuing every day? What benefit and merit has it brought me? Through such reflection, generate a resolve to seek the ultimate liberation.

## EFFICACY STORY: A HUNTER SAVED BY KSITIGARBHA

During the Five Dynasties period of China, in the Jing State, there was a man who made a living by hunting and he was especially skilled in killing wild geese. Because he had such exceptional power and skills at hunting geese, he was widely known as the “Super Hunter of Geese”. When he was fifty-one, he got sick and died. Then his wife threw his corpse at a deserted place of tombs, letting it be devoured by wild beasts. After three days however, he came to life and returned home. Seeing him, his wife got terrified and thought it must be a crazy ghost. He told her not to be afraid and then related the following story to her:

“After I died, I was picked up by a flaming vehicle. As soon as I boarded it, I was engulfed in fierce fire. What an agony! Soon after, there came a monk. He poured water on the vehicle and the fire was extinguished. So I felt cool and released. Then I was sent to the front of King Yama. There, I saw hundreds of thousands of

birds and beasts, like pigs, sheep, geese, chickens, and so on and so forth. They collectively appealed to the King to impose severe punishment on me, 'It was him who deprived us of our lives!'

"King Yama replied, 'Considering your accusations, he must be an evil person. But his ancestor worshiped Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and by virtue of that, he is protected by Ksitigarbha. That is why when he was in the fire vehicle, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva came to protect him from suffering in the flame.' At that time, seeing those animals accuse me, I was so scared and started to pray to Ksitigarbha. As I prayed, all birds and beasts transformed into humans. Then King Yama released me and so I revived."

Thereafter, he left his home. Declaring himself to be "the servant for the Buddha," he wandered from place to place to exhort people to take refuge in Ksitigarbha.

We can see that the man in the story originally wasn't a Buddhist, not to mention being a devotee of Ksitigarbha. As a skillful hunter having no bounds in killing and hunting, he was still saved by Ksitigarbha only because his ancestor, though it was not clear how far the ancestor was from his generation, worshiped Ksitigarbha. Therefore, if one worships Ksitigarbha, all his offspring will be under Ksitigarbha's wing. If one is a Buddhist and sets a shrine at home where he or she worships Ksitigarbha, even if the younger

generations in the family, either his or her children or grandchildren, belittle or denigrate his or her belief and action, they will nonetheless receive the blessing of Ksitigarbha. This benefit may extend even to future offspring of the family, which is like how the whole family can benefit from its one member who undertakes a monastic life. As the saying goes, "If one gets ordained, by virtue of that, all one's family members within the nine degrees of kinship to him or her will ascend to heaven."

This time, by learning the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, it is important to cultivate a strong confidence in the benefit of the Dharma practice. First of all, we will receive all benefits when practicing the Dharma by ourselves, as we have learned yesterday, "Good men and good women in the present and future should themselves cultivate virtue when they are healthy and hearing well. They will receive every part of the benefit."

Secondly, we can also work for the benefit of others through the Dharma practice. As we have learned how the Brahman woman or the daughter Bright Eyes benefited their mothers, we know that if we recite noble sutras or build statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas with an altruistic intent for the sake of others, they will certainly be benefited. Regarding how much benefit they gain, whether just one-seventh of the whole or more, it depends on the degree of the doer's altruistic intent and dedication. Last but not least,

such virtuous practice will bring favorable effects to our future generations, as well as those who have a connection with us, either good or bad.

Considering these benefits, we should all try to promote Buddhism to others. If you are incapable of giving Dharma teachings to a great number of people, you can at least endeavor to benefit those around you, including your family, friends, and people in your hometown. Except for the few individuals who are lucky to grow up in communities with temples and Buddhist belief, most of you probably live in an environment where even the name of the Three Jewels is not heard while bad customs and unvirtuous deeds such as killing prevail. Faced with such circumstances, you can try to erect a statue of Ksitigarbha or Buddha Shakyamuni or to print and circulate sutras in your hometown, so that the local people can come into contact with the noble beings or teachings and thereby gain benefit. You should generate such an altruistic aspiration. The blessing of the Three Jewels is inconceivable and the force of the karmic law is infallible. Likewise, the power of aspiration is unimaginable. With a pure and altruistic aspiration, you will get the opportunity to realize it.

## QUESTION FROM KING YAMA

In the previous lecture we talked about King Yama as the representative of ghosts and spirits, who came to the Buddha and told him that they felt very fortunate to be able to attend the Dharma gathering. Meanwhile, he harbored some doubt and wanted to take the opportunity to ask the Buddha his questions and hear the Buddha's answer.

**The Buddha told King Yama, "Ask whatever you wish. I will explain it for you."**

The Buddha can answer any question of anyone without any difficulty. The *Sutra of the Heap of Jewels* says,

*Even oceans of questions  
From all hosts of beings,  
Can be satisfactorily resolved  
In one speech without any fear.  
This is indeed inconceivable.*

Whatever sharp questions are raised, the Buddha can resolve them all in one speech in a satisfactory way. The Buddha has no fear or difficulty in answering them. This is indeed incredible. The Buddha has four types of unhindered knowledge, which enable him to provide perfect answers to whatever questions. Actually, not only the Buddha, eminent monks and great masters are also able to answer any question with ease because they have gained a deep realization of the Dharma.

When I just came to Larung Gar, the teaching of His Holiness used to start at a quarter past one o'clock in the afternoon. At that time, there were not too many people, about one or two hundred. After the teaching, His Holiness would usually allow us to ask him questions. He requested questions to be raised all at once, so many khenpos would stand up and speak their questions at the same time. Nonetheless, every time His Holiness would give clear and excellent answers to all questions one by one. That scene was amazing, so I was very fond of the Q&A session.

Later on, I was invited to give a talk at a university and I wanted to emulate His Holiness's manner of answering questions. So after the talk, I let the audience raise questions in close succession, and sometimes there would be four questions at a time. I tried to keep in mind all questions and then gave respective answers one by one. In most cases, I did well but there were still a few instances where



I had missed certain points. From this experience, I could clearly feel the inconceivable wisdom of His Holiness.

As a matter of fact, raising questions during studies is necessary. Some Chinese teachers, either Dharma teachers or worldly teachers, dislike other people asking them questions, feeling that this is deliberately making things difficult for them. It is wrong to think this way. If you can answer, just answer it. If you cannot, just say it honestly. There is no shame. You may refuse it by saying “I am not in the position to answer this question”, “it is not necessary to answer it now”, or simply “I don’t want to answer this question.”

In China, most parents care most about their children’s exam scores, and students who always raise a variety of questions are not welcomed by many teachers. Jews are quite the opposite. For them, exam score is not a cause for concern. Jewish parents usually ask their children, “Have you got a good question for your classmate today? Did you ask your teacher any questions today?” At school, the teacher’s favorites are students who can ask particularly sharp questions.

In reality, wisdom arises from debates and questions. In Sakya Pandita’s *Treasury of Good Advice*, it says,

*Until the learned are thoroughly questioned,  
Their depth cannot be assessed.*

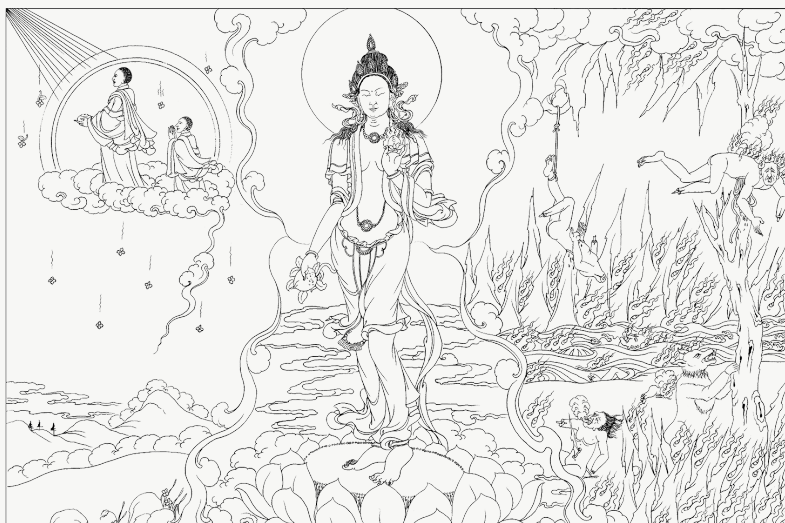
*Until a drum is beaten by drumsticks,  
Its distinction from other drums is unknown.*

Until a drum is beaten by drumsticks, it cannot be known whether it differs from a common wooden milk cask or things of the like. Likewise, if you do not ask questions to the learned nor discuss with them, then you will not delve into the depth of their knowledge. Therefore, debates and questions are necessary because they are the best test of wisdom.

While we encourage questions, we should not go to another extreme. When asking questions, try to come up with something clear and thought-provoking. Some people are always itching to raise questions but usually cannot ask anything constructive. Or even worse, they cannot bring about a clear question regarding the given topic and just want to say something unrelated. That is pointless. Also, there are some speakers who overestimate their own ability and knowledge so they just leave other people to ask whatever questions. At the end, they may not understand the question, let alone give the answers. This would also be unfortunate.

**At that time, King Yama reverently gazed at and made obeisance to the World-Honored One, turned to behold Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, and then said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, I see that Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva uses hundreds of thousands**

of skillful means in the six realms of existence to guide wrongdoing suffering beings across [to liberation], and he does so indefatigably. This great Bodhisattva has deeds of such inconceivable supernatural power. Yet, the multitudes of beings—after they gain release from the ripened effects of wrongdoing, before long they again fall into the lower realms. World-Honored One, since Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva has such inconceivable spiritual power, why do living beings not dwell relying on the virtuous path and attain eternal liberation? O World-Honored One, please explain this for me.”



When Master Chin Kung was teaching this part, he said because Ksitigarbha was King Yama's teacher, he greeted him before replying to the Buddha. This makes sense. King Yama governs the nether world, the world for beings in the bardo state, and Ksitigarbha is the lord and guide there, so he could be the teacher of the King. Such an intriguing plot!

King Yama said to the Buddha that he saw Ksitigarbha shuttle back and forth in the six realms, especially in hell, to rescue suffering beings. We have talked about many stories that Ksitigarbha came to the nether world to save beings. For eons of time, Ksitigarbha has been working for the benefit and liberation of beings with all kinds of skillful means. However obstinate those beings are, he has always been persevering, never feeling downcast, despaired, or even a moment of tiredness and weariness. This is the inconceivable spirit of the great bodhisattvas and their most admirable quality.

Many Dharma practitioners who volunteer for enlightenment activities for the benefit of others, however, feel weary after serving the community for just a year or two. In the beginning, they are filled with enthusiasm. As time passes, the initial high spirits wear out and some of them may even begin to have conflicts with others and give up in the end. For Mahayana practitioners who have taken the bodhisattva vow, no matter what difficulties we encounter in the process of benefiting beings and propagating the Dharma, we

should never get weary, timid, or hesitant, but need to keep going steadfastly and follow the example of Ksitigarbha. In benefiting beings, Ksitigarbha is always a “workaholic” with a zeal that is not measured in years or thousands of years, but in countless eons. This kind of spirit is worthy for everyone, either Buddhist or non-Buddhist, to learn from.

Although countless beings have been released from their karmic retributions for the moment, many of them fall back into the lower realms again before long. Being ridden with grave negative habitual tendency, sentient beings alternate between good and evil. One moment their positive habitual tendency arises and they do good, but the next moment their evil karma appears and they do bad. They are like elephants who often bathe in the mud, shuttling between the mud and the dry land. This is a sad reality for many sentient beings.

No matter how incredible the power that Ksitigarbha possesses and how vast the aspirations Ksitigarbha has made to tirelessly save sentient beings, many sentient beings still fall back into the lower realms after Ksitigarbha has rescued them from the retributions of their wrongdoing. Why can they not be placed forever in the state of happiness without regression? Why does Ksitigarbha have to work so hard to rescue them over and over again? Would it not be nice if Ksitigarbha can rescue them all at once, and establish them

on a virtuous path once and for all? King Yama felt puzzled and pleaded with the Buddha to explain this to him.

Many of us may also have the same question, but this is like asking, “Would it not be good to close the prisons forever after all the inmates are released? Why are there more and more inmates?” However, it is not that simple. Sentient beings’ karmic tendency is complicated and long-lasting. For example, we see many repeat offenders who have to be sent back to prisons repeatedly because each time after release, they commit new crimes. Similarly, for many drug addicts, no matter how hard they try to quit, it is very likely that they will pick up the habit again. Unfortunately, humans can often be weak and unable to persist on the path for good.

## THE OBSTINATE AND CONFUSED PERSON

The Buddha told King Yama, “Living beings of Jambudvipa have obstinate dispositions, difficult to regulate and difficult to tame. This great Bodhisattva rescues such beings everywhere throughout hundreds of thousands of kalpas, causing them to attain liberation early. For people who undergo the ripened effects of wrongdoing, even those who have fallen into the very low realms, the Bodhisattva uses the power of skillful means to extract their fundamental karmic conditions and lead them to realize the events of their previous lives. However, because beings of Jambudvipa have heavy habits of forming evil, no sooner have they left [the lower realms] they go back in [again]. This necessitates the Bodhisattva to work hard throughout many kalpas in guiding them across to liberation.

The Buddha told King Yama that it is not as simple as he imagined. Unlike beings of Uttarakuru or other worlds, beings of Jambudvipa

are particularly stubborn and difficult to tame. They are good at doing evil and difficult to be guided toward goodness. I cannot agree more with this based on my personal experiences. Some people can be really intractable and even if the Buddha were to appear in front of them, they would still refuse to change, let alone be tamed by others.

Therefore, in hundreds of thousands of eons, Ksitigarbha has manifested in various embodiments in every realm to rescue sentient beings one by one. He works hard in the hope that these beings can obtain liberation quickly. For those who are undergoing retributions in the worst destinies, for example, as hell beings or hungry ghosts, Ksitigarbha applies a variety of expedient methods to remove or eliminate their root karmic obscurations, and then leads them to recall the events of their past lives.

While here it is translated as “heavy habits of forming evil”, the original Chinese means “severe fetters and heavy habits of evil”. “Fetter” is another name for mental affliction, the definition and category of which is clearly explained in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*. Briefly speaking, there are three or nine fetters of major mental afflictions, which can be further divided into more. “Heavy habits of evil” can refer to the ten non-virtuous actions. Beings of Jambudvīpa are so fettered by afflictive emotions and evil karma, even if Ksitigarbha applies various skillful means to rescue them from



the lower realms, helping them extract their karmic obscurations, they keep falling back over and over again, causing Ksitigarbha to have to work continuously for many eons to continuously rescue and release them.

In the same manner, our virtuous masters have utilized all kinds of methods to guide us toward virtue, to let us confess our misdeeds, to make us realize the nature of mind, and so on and so forth. They have imparted to us all what we should know, but because we are heavily loaded with negative karma from previous lives, we are overwhelmed by our mental afflictions again and again. As a result, we are still trapped in the mire of samsara, going back and forth between higher and lower realms and have not attained liberation.

Most ordinary beings have such unstable dispositions. Sometimes, through the blessing of buddhas and bodhisattvas, we feel good in every aspect: our mood is good, the weather is nice, the food tastes delicious, and it would seem that liberation is not far from us, especially when we hear teachings of emptiness or the luminous and empty nature of mind, we would feel that all our problems and afflictions are gone. “Watch the empty space of the vast sky, it has no birth nor death. So is everything and my mind. Wow, how wonderful!” However, after just a very short time, when we have to go out and interact with the world, afflictions strike and

even the weather seems dismal. Then, we sadly find out that “the empty and vast sky is obscured by dark clouds, and there are even horrible thunders and lightning.”

Therefore, beings of this world have brought many troubles to the great bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, making him work throughout many eons to guide and tame them. One day they would listen to the teaching and behave well, but the next day they get rebellious. That is how we are before our spiritual teachers. Sometimes we are progressing well with our study and practice under their guidance. But, due to the shackles of negative karmic force, we would also do a lot of things that would displease our lineage masters. That is why we are still ordinary people undergoing various sufferings and waiting for their help.

There was a great master named Gyalwa Yang Gonpa. He said that the negative habitual tendencies of sentient beings are like a rolled-up piece of paper. Even when we unroll it, it will automatically roll up again if we let go. It means that because our habitual tendencies are so strong, they can easily make a comeback. For example, many people came to get ordained here at Larung Gar. In the beginning, they were so determined to seek liberation and constantly reminded themselves, “I am a seeker of liberation. I shall not bind myself to reputation and offerings.” However, after a while, their old propensities re-emerge. For instance, their inclination

toward their past occupations, the attachment to families and friends, or the habit of fighting with others, all of these negative habitual tendencies could strengthen and return.

So, it is a hard task to liberate sentient beings. It is always easy to say but much more difficult to do. Being a Dharma teacher is also challenging, especially for a teacher who not only has to give Dharma teachings but also supervise the study and practice of a class of students. Some Dharma teachers remain cool and unperturbed by any behavior of their students. They are focused on their teachings and may seem indifferent about the supervision of their students, as if they do not mind if the students can get liberated or not. On the contrary, some Dharma teachers are very sensitive. They are exhilarated when someone in their class does well in his study. But when this person performs poorly and makes trouble later, they would start to worry and be saddened. They are easily affected by the performance of their students. It is really not an easy task to guide and benefit beings.

**“Suppose there was a person who lost his way home and, by mistake, entered a dangerous path, in which there were many yaksas, tigers, wolves, lions, lizards, snakes, vipers, and scorpions. Such a confused person on that dangerous path would be harmed within a short time. A virtuous friend who was knowledgeable of many great skills and good at stopping and keeping**

out the injurious and poisonous, including yaksas and other evil fierce beings, would suddenly come upon the confused man about to walk further on that dangerous path and say to him, 'Hey! Fellow! Why are you entering this road? What special means do you have to restrain injurious and poisonous beings?'



“Upon hearing these words suddenly, the confused traveler would come to realize that he was on a dangerous path and would immediately turn back, seeking to leave that road. That virtuous friend would then take him by the hand, lead him off the dangerous path so that he would avoid the evils and poisons, and help him reach the good path so that he would gain peace and happiness. Then the virtuous friend would say to him, ‘Well!

**Confused one! From now on, do not walk on that path again. Those who enter it will have difficulty getting out, and moreover, they will suffer harm to their lives.'**

**"The confused traveler would feel the seriousness [of the dangers on that path], too. As they were about to part, the virtuous friend would further say, 'If you see relatives, friends, as well as other travelers, be they men or women, tell them that, on that dangerous path there are many poisons and evils which will cause people to lose their lives. Do not allow them to [unwittingly] bring about their own deaths.'**



The Buddha uses an analogy to describe how beings of Jambudvīpa fall again and again into the lower realms. According to scriptures, those ferocious spirits or animals on the dangerous path mentioned in the text represent beings' poisonous mental afflictions: yakshas represent wrong views, tigers arrogance, wolves greed, lions ignorance, and lizards, snakes, vipers, and scorpions symbolize hatred. These spirits or animals all have obvious features in the negative emotions they represent.

The knowledgeable friend told the formerly lost person not to travel on the dangerous path again because it would be very difficult to escape and he would most likely lose his life if he goes on that path again. The life here may imply our wisdom life, i.e., the spiritual continuum of seeking enlightenment. The lost person was certainly very appreciative and moved because if he had not met the virtuous friend, he would have been in great danger. As they were about to part, the friend exhorted him that if he sees other friends, relatives, passers-by, be they men or women, he should make it clear to them that this path is very dangerous and even threatens their lives, and that they shall not risk death by entering that path.

Here the virtuous friend refers to Kṣitigarbha. But from a broader sense, he stands for all virtuous teachers. When I was translating this section, it resonated with me deeply. I felt from the bottom of

my heart that each of us is really a lost and confused traveler. If we have not encountered virtuous spiritual teachers who show us the path to liberation, we will continue to wander in samsara and will inevitably be trapped into the dens of various dangerous animals or spirits for endless time.

At the beginning, we encounter virtuous teachers, who point out to us that we are walking along the wrong path, which will absolutely lead us into the terrifying abyss of samsara. We then realize that our way of life is wrong and dangerous. Then they kindly guide us onto the path to liberation and remind us to not return to the wrong path thereafter. In addition, they also urge us to share this message with all others we meet so that they will not risk their lives on the wrong and dangerous path.

Eventually, our spiritual teachers will leave us because they cannot remain in the world forever. When their lives end, they would leave us with their final teaching and their heartfelt exhortations engendered from their life-long experience of spiritual practice, urging us to conduct ourselves meticulously according to the karmic law. Out of compassion toward all beings, they would also exhort us to take the responsibility of helping others not go astray because samsara is too dangerous and horrendous. There are so many beastlike afflictions awaiting to devour beings that once a

being is captured by them, he or she will suffer for numerous eons before having a chance of release.

When I was reading this the other day, I cannot help but think of the kindness and compassion of those great masters in the past. In olden days, it was very hard for the masters to leave the remote Tibetan mountains to propagate the Dharma. Transportation was very poor and those masters were often not in good health. However, in order to make virtuous connections with beings outside, they exerted themselves tirelessly, undertaking all kinds of hardship. Now, whenever I go out of the Larung Gar valley through the expressway or airplanes, I would think of the past masters' great endeavors to benefit beings. Regrettably, they are no longer with us.

As in the story of the confused traveler, virtuous teachers can appear out of the blue in our life journey and rescue us. But however unwilling we may be, one day they will depart, leaving us with heartfelt instructions. As the Venerable Longchenpa said in the *Treasury of Pith Instruction*, and quoted in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*,

*You would like to study Dharma with your wonderful teacher  
Forever, but you are certain to part.*



*You would like to be with your good spiritual friends*

*Forever, but you are certain to separate.*

When I was translating this part in Chengdu, I had a strong emotion and I could not stop thinking of my gurus, and in particular, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. Nothing is greater than the kindness of the guru in this world. If I had not met my guru, I would still be exactly like this lost traveler, thinking arrogantly that I was choosing the right path. As a student at a traditional teacher-training school, I would have continued my training as a professional teacher, believing that it was the most important thing in life and never found the path to liberation in this short life.

I followed His Holiness for 19 years and throughout those years, I worked hard and tried my best to please him and live up to his expectations. On several occasions, my endeavor might have failed to bring about a satisfactory result which perhaps was on account of my karma from previous lives.

Before encountering His Holiness, I was fortunate to meet Khenpo Tepas who kindly introduced me to His Holiness and also encouraged me to get ordained and come to Larung Gar. I clearly remember that when I was 23, on the thirteenth day of the first month of the Tibetan calendar, in the spring of 1985, I received the teaching of *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* from Khenpo Tepas.

That was the first time in my life that I received the teachings of liberation. After a month or so, I came to Larung Gar for the first time and received from His Holiness the empowerments and transmissions of the complete works of Lerab Lingpa. These are the teachings that embarked me on the path to liberation in this life, entirely different from any of the courses that I attended in traditional schools, which have nothing whatsoever to do with liberation.

People indeed gain knowledge at school. But whatever major they are in, be it fashion design, physics, chemistry, astronomy, geography, biology, or the like, what they learn is only worldly knowledge that are not directly related to the liberation from samsara. That is why some lay Buddhists have tears welling up in their eyes when reflecting what would have happened if they had not encountered the path to liberation in this lifetime. Their lives would be filled with afflictions. Many of you probably have the same experience and feel fortunate to have encountered a virtuous master who can show you the way to liberation because whatever other paths you choose in this world, you would nonetheless be submerged in samsara for a time that sees no end.

I am not denying the kindness of our worldly teachers. But only spiritual Dharma teachers can genuinely show us the way to liberation. If we do not encounter them, we will be forever hopelessly

trapped in samsara. As a result of that, I cannot stress more the value and kindness of our spiritual teachers.

**“In the same way, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, replete with great kindness and compassion, rescues wrongdoing suffering beings and enables them to be reborn among humans and devas, so that they experience wonderful happiness. These wrongdoing beings would come to know the suffering of the [bad] karmic paths. After they obtain release, they would never go [on those paths] again. They are like the confused traveler who by mistake entered the dangerous path but who, having met a virtuous friend who led him out, would never enter it again. Whenever he would come upon others, he would advise them not to enter that path, saying that because he was confused, [he took that path before, but now that] he has gained release, he would not enter that path again.**

**“If he should walk on it again, he would still be confused and mistaken, unaware that it is the dangerous path he had fallen into before. He may then lose his life. This is like falling into the lower realms. By virtue of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva’s power of skillful means, beings obtain release and gain rebirth among humans and devas, but shortly thereafter, they go back [to doing evil and fall] into [the lower realms] again. If they form heavy**

**karma, interminably long they will remain in the hells without a time of release.”**



Thanks to the great compassion of Ksitigarbha, some beings who are liberated from suffering will never fall back into it again. These are beings with sharp faculties and we can see such cases around us. Even if they always went astray and had committed many misdeeds in the past, their keen faculties and accumulation of sufficient merit from previous lives allow them to see their errors. After being guided by virtuous masters and as long as they apply mindfulness and introspective awareness, they can avoid committing the same mistakes and become excellent in the three trainings of discipline, meditation, and wisdom to benefit themselves. In addition, they

would also benefit others by warning them not to fall into the dangerous path of samsara. They would share with others on how they had also wrongly taken that path before and that now they have gained release, they would never take that path again.

There are other beings who after being released from the dangerous path return again and again onto the same route, without even being aware that it is where they had lost their way and was caught by danger before. They do not possess the smallest amount of mindfulness and introspective awareness and are putting their lives at risk. They are those who “when the wound has healed, forget the pain.” Although by the power of Ksitigarbha’s skillful means, they have been released and taken rebirth in the human and god realm, they would fall down to the lower realms again afterward. If their negative karma were too grave, such as those incurred by the five crimes with immediate retribution or violation of samayas, they would fall into hell without liberation. This would indeed be a terrible outcome.

These are beings with inferior faculties. This means beings who are ridden with heavily negative karma such that even if they have been instructed by spiritual teachers on the path to virtue and liberation, they cannot adjust their habits and stop engaging in misdeeds. As a result, they always regress and fall back into the lower realms. As we have mentioned before, for habitual offenders,

even if they are released, many of them cannot avoid repeating crimes and will probably be sent back to jail.

This explains why some people continue to fall back into the lower realms. While it would be good if all sentient beings can be liberated once and for all, their karma plays a decisive role in their liberation. Therefore, try as much as possible to repent and purify our negative karma whenever afflictive emotions arise. By doing this and with the incredible blessing of Ksitigarbha, no hindrance will there be that are too great for our liberation.

## THE PROMISE OF GHOST KING EVIL POISON

At that time, Ghost King Evil Poison joined his palms in respect and said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, we measureless number of ghost kings benefit or harm people in Jambudvīpa, and we each do so differently. However, the ripened effects of karma cause our retinue and us to travel in the world [doing] much of the unwholesome and little of the wholesome. When we pass people’s homes, cities, villages, manors, or houses where there are men or women who cultivate wholesome deeds as minute as hair fibers, who but hang a banner or a canopy or present a little incense or a few flowers to make offering in veneration to the images of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, or who recite the sacred sutras or burn incense as an offering to even a sentence or a verse in them, all of us ghost kings respect and revere such people, just as we do for the Buddhas of the past, present, and future. We command the smaller ghosts, each of whom has great power, as well as the earth spirits to protect

them and not allow evil events, untoward happenings, virulent diseases, untoward serious illnesses, as well as unwelcome phenomena to come near these houses and places, much less enter the doors.”



There are countless ghost kings in this world and some bring benefits to people, like Ghost King Presiding Over Food, Ghost King Presiding Over Wealth, and so on, while others mainly bring people harm. Different ghosts have different specialties and powers, but because of the ripened effects of their karma, most of them engage mainly in destructive deeds when they travel in the world.



The fact is ghosts are everywhere in this world. Some practitioners say that there is no ghost at Larung Gar. This would be untrue according to the teaching here. I believe that there must be ghosts here and also in other holy places blessed by Padmasambhava. Due to the blessing of enlightened masters, the number of ghosts is probably fewer in these holy places. As you stay at your wooden cabin here at Larung Gar, there will be ghosts around you, and they may manifest themselves at night after you turn off the light. (Khenpo laughing...)

I am good at making up ghost stories. When I was at school, my fellow students always asked me to tell ghost stories. I was really good at it and whenever I told a story they would feel so afraid that they dared not to return home. Then I would continue. We loved doing these funny things at school.

Those who do good deeds and worship the images of Ksitigarbha or other buddhas and bodhisattvas will be greatly respected by all ghost kings. They will revere this kind of people just as they do for the buddhas of the past, present, and future. Knowing this, we should engage in all kinds of virtuous deeds such as reciting sutras, hanging prayer flags, and making offerings of incense or flowers to buddhas. Even if we cultivate wholesome deeds as minute as a hair fiber, obstacles and misfortunes will not appear.

Furthermore, the ghost kings will instruct all their subordinate ghosts to safeguard us. Each of these minor ghosts has great power and supervises a specific aspect or area of the world, including earth deities, water deities, tree deities, kitchen gods, and so on. Whenever we see anyone practice virtue, even if it is as simple as chanting the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, making offerings to the teachings of Ksitigarbha, even just one stanza, be aware that the ghost kings will summon their many subordinate ghosts and spirits to protect this person. They will prevent all kinds of unwelcome events, from accidents that cause tragic and violent death to severe and unexpected illnesses, from coming near this person's residence, much less entering the door.

Troubles and misfortune are caused by various factors, one of which is the influence of ghosts and spirits. Therefore, if we lack protection from Dharma protectors or protective spirits, we could be frequently harassed by different nonhuman spirits. That being the case, it would be helpful for us if we carry with us at all times sacred objects that possess blessings. Yesterday, I saw a Tibetan child, who was carrying many pouches with miscellaneous blessed holy items. I joked with him, "This is a tsampa bag, this is a ghee bag, and this is a milk dregs bag." People who have no spiritual faith may think it idiotic to carry these items for protection. Nonetheless, it is important to have spiritual beliefs and seek the blessing of holy

objects for peace and happiness, especially when we are faced with all sorts of catastrophes like fires, earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, or pandemics around the world.

**The Buddha praised the ghost kings, “Excellent, excellent! All you ghost kings and Yama are able to support and protect good men and good women in this way. I will tell Brahma and Sakra to protect all of you as well.”**

After the two groups, one being the group of Yama represented by King Yama and the other the group of ghosts led by Ghost King Evil Poison, have spoken, the Buddha praised them and acknowledged that it is meritorious for them to safeguard people who practice virtue. The Buddha promised to let the heavenly gods, like Brahma, Indra, and the four heavenly kings, protect them and their retinues, because after all, they are under the jurisdiction of those gods.

With this command, all the heavenly gods will now protect those who practice virtue as well. In order to protect ourselves as well as other sentient beings, therefore, we need to practice virtue, and especially sincerely embrace the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. It would be great if you can always carry with you a copy of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Previously I had requested that everyone carry at all times a copy of the *Verse Summary of the Perfection of Wisdom, the Ksitigarbha Sutra*

is not a requirement because I do not want you to be overloaded with scriptures. However, a word to the wise, it can bring you immense benefit and blessing if you carry with you scriptures like the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* or *Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha*. Fear no more as you will be protected by multitudes of ghosts and will be taken under the wings of the heavenly kings and gods.

# Lecture Eighteen

August 21st, 2020

## HEARTFELT ADVICES FOR PRACTITIONERS AT LARUNG GAR

Before today's teaching, I would like to say a few words. Anyone at Larung Gar, whether a monastic or a lay practitioner, should know the importance of learning and contemplating the Dharma, and the necessity of its corresponding meditation and practice. So firstly, I hope you will attend Dharma lectures every day for as long as you stay here, either my lectures or those offered by other khenpos and khenmos. Except for a few of you who spend much of your time serving the sangha or engaging in specific Dharma activities, all the rest of you should cherish the favorable condition you have to hear the Dharma teachings. Instead of wasting any time, you should have the discipline to exert yourself in Dharma study and practice. This is of great benefits to you. However, if you indulge in your usual bad habits such as sleeping, engaging in idleness, or other meaningless entertainment, you will miss a great opportunity to experience the nourishing nectar of the Dharma. Without the Dharma as an antidote, your bad habits will become

more and more fixated as you grow accustomed to them. As it was mentioned in the previous lecture, habitual tendencies are like a rolled-up piece of paper which will automatically roll back even after we unfold it. Therefore, please pay great attention to Dharma lectures.

Secondly, I hope all of you will try your best to properly manage your time and treasure every minute you have. Life is precious and short. While you are here, you are supposed to spend all your time learning and practicing the Dharma. We should cherish our own time and also respect other people's time. Modern technology has made getting in touch with each other very easy and we can make a call or send a text message anytime. But we should only contact others when it is necessary. Frequent texting or calling can be a disturbance to others. Everyone should learn and practice the Dharma at their own pace and work on the Dharma activities that would benefit others. However, when you cannot control your idleness and start to intrude into other's time of study and contemplation by engaging them in other activities, such as inviting them to dinner or just gossiping with them, please know that their time is indeed their precious life. They would want to use their time on meaningful activities instead of being distracted by trivial things. Historically, great masters would never waste their time for even a minute. They spent their time only on meaningful

activities, learning, contemplating, and meditating on the Dharma, or engaging in Dharma activities for the wellbeing of sentient beings.

For those practitioners who have taken on the responsibility for certain Dharma projects, I hope you can give your full energy and attention to your projects during working time and try your best to study and practice the Dharma outside of your work schedules because it is impossible to do both at the same time. After work, you should try your best to use the time for your own study and practice. As I have always emphasized, learning the Dharma, practicing the Dharma, and benefiting sentient beings are the three things that are of vital importance for each Mahayana practitioner.



## EFFICACY STORY: KSITIGARBHA SAVES THOSE WHO HAVE NO FAITH IN HIM

There are a great number of stories in the *Records of Efficacy of Ksitigarbha Image*, all of which show the evidence of the inconceivable blessing of Ksitigarbha. The one that I would like to share with you today happened in the Tang Dynasty. At that time, there was a lady, Ms. Li, who was sincerely devoted to Buddhism and enshrined a twenty-inch-high wood carved Ksitigarbha statue in her house. Ms. Li had a maid who was about fifty years old. This maid held strong wrong views and had no faith in Buddhism at all. One day, when Ms. Li was out, the maid took this chance to throw out the Ksitigarbha statue and dumped it in the fields. When Ms. Li came home, she discovered that the statue was gone but did not know it was thrown away by the maid. She kept crying and looked for the statue everywhere. Then she saw a beam of light in the fields and following it, she found the statue and happily brought it back.

The next day, the maid fainted while she was out in the fields for a whole day. When she regained consciousness, she burst out crying and recounted her experience in the bardo. After her death, two Yama guards on horseback escorted her to King Yama. It was a horrifying scene and the King scolded her saying that since she held strong wrong views and did not respect the Ksitigarbha statue, and furthermore, she dumped the Ksitigarbha statue in the fields, she would be sentenced to spend time in the great hell for such a serious offense. When King Yama was about to punish her, a monk appeared. As soon as the King saw the monk, he came down quickly from his throne and asked the monk respectfully, "Dear teacher, what has made you come over?" The monk said, "This maid was from my patron's home. Although she disliked me and discarded my statue, she was the maid of my patron after all, so I need to save her from suffering. Would you please kindly extend her lifespan and send her back to the human world?" King Yama then said, "My teacher, I will definitely follow your instruction."

Hearing their conversation, the maid felt great remorse and started to confess her misdeeds. The voice of "Namo Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva" arose spontaneously from her. Through her devoted chanting, numerous offenders who were shackled in the hall of King Yama were unshackled automatically and they all got liberated from the lower realms. The maid was then brought back

to the human world by Ksitigarbha and resurrected. Hearing her experience, Ms. Li generated even stronger devotion to Ksitigarbha and paid continuous homage and made offerings to this statue. All the people in her county were also touched by the maid's story and gave rise to great faith in Ksitigarbha.

From this story, we can see the incredible blessing of Ksitigarbha. Even those who damage his holy images out of wrong views could be saved by Ksitigarbha. He would not take revenge like ordinary people usually do, but rather benefit them with his great compassion and power. As long as the image of Ksitigarbha is enshrined at one's home, not only Ksitigarbha's believers, but their family members who have no faith in him would also gain benefit. Great bodhisattvas benefit sentient beings with no exception, and even those who do harm to them will be blessed. As Shantideva said in his *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

*I go for refuge to those springs of happiness  
Who bring their very enemies to perfect bliss.*

People who have strong conceptual thought may not easily believe or may hold doubt in such efficacy stories. I believe most Han Chinese people would have faith in the Ksitigarbha practice as in their history and in their culture, many stories on Ksitigarbha's blessing can be found throughout the various dynasties, including

the Tang Dynasty, the Song Dynasty, and the period of the Five Dynasties. These stories have been instrumental in helping Han Chinese develop faith in Ksitigarbha.

When we study a scripture or follow a Dharma practice, we should learn about the devotion people in the past had to them. If we look back in history, we could see the devotion and reverence that people in the past had in building holy statues, making wall paintings, or copying sutras by hand. As a result, they gained remarkable experiences and accomplishments in their Dharma practice. Moreover, they recorded these experiences meticulously to benefit future generations. It was not convenient in ancient times to collect and record information, but still a great number of precious stories were documented. This is a good example for us modern people to emulate and such spiritual wealth is truly invaluable. This is the reason why in every lecture, I will share with you an efficacy story of Ksitigarbha's image that was recorded by the monk Changjin in the Song Dynasty.

If we compare people today to those from the past, it is clear that regardless of whether we are from the East or the West, most of us are more concerned with material possessions than spiritual attainment and thus we would not have much spiritual wealth to pass on to future generations. I think this may be one of the biggest differences between us and people of the past. A reason for

this could be that with the constant information overload that we experience in this high-tech world, we are often distracted from paying enough attention to our spiritual development. As Dharma practitioners in this modern age, we need to make a strong effort to shield ourselves from any meaningless distractions.

## WHAT SHOULD BE DONE AT THE TIME OF BIRTH?

Now we continue with the *Ksitigarbha sutra*. The eighth chapter is mainly about the conversations between Buddha Shakyamuni and King Yama and two ghost kings. In the previous lecture, we discussed the conversation between Buddha Shakyamuni and Ghost King Evil Poison. Normally, ghosts and demons can be very scary, even their names sound terrifying, but in fact some of them are very kind and benevolent. As we learned from this sutra, as long as a person has done even the smallest of good deeds, the Ghost King Evil Poison will protect and support this person. The Buddha was very happy with the ghost and requested Brahma and Sakra to also offer protection to him. Now we will introduce another ghost king, the Ghost King Presiding Over Life. I hope you will remember all these teachings.

## Benefit the Newborn and the Mother

As these words were spoken, in the assembly there was a ghost king named Presiding Over Life who said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, in accordance with conditions of karma I preside over a human’s lifespan in Jambudvīpa; I am in charge of both the time of birth and the time of death. As in my original vows, I wish very much to benefit living beings, but they do not realize my intention. They therefore go through birth and death in distress. Why is this?”



Ghost King Presiding Over Life is filled with kindness toward beings of Jambudvīpa and he is responsible for their lifespans, in

charge of the time of birth and the time of death, two of the most crucial moments for every person. Given the numbers of births and deaths, he is constantly busy and has a great retinue to assist him. Nowadays, deaths could come from sickness, wars, conflicts, man-made accidents, or natural disasters.

Human beings in this world are quite fortunate because Ghost King Presiding Over Life has made original vows to benefit people of Jambudvipa. Sadly, however, most people fail to realize his kind intention and commit a multitude of non-virtuous deeds that consequently cause them to go through birth and death in distress. They are unable to enjoy any peace when dying or giving birth to a baby. People often say that if one commits too many non-virtuous deeds, he or she could not be saved by the power of ghosts, Dharma protectors, or even the monastic sangha. Without any merit accumulated through performing virtuous deeds, one would indeed have to experience suffering instead of being saved by others. In the following text, Ghost King Presiding Over Life described what kinds of virtuous deeds need to be done at the time of birth and death.

**“When people of Jambudvipa have just borne children, whether boys or girls, or when they are about to give birth, good deeds should be done to increase the benefits of the household. Then naturally the local earth spirits will be immeasurably joyful and**



**will protect the mother and child so that they obtain great peace and happiness. [...]**



The ghost king says, doing virtuous deeds at the time when a child is about to be born or has just been born brings benefits to the entire family, especially the mother and child. The local earth spirits will be pleased and joyfully protect the family. Similar statements can be found in quite a few other sutras. Some sutras say that if others perform virtuous deeds for the child at the time of birth, for instance, making buddha statues, hanging prayer banners, or releasing captive lives, the child's lifespan will be prolonged and he or she will enjoy longevity.

A book of Buddhist anecdotes compiled by Master Baochang in the Liang Dynasty, *Exceptional Stories in Sutras and Vinaya Texts*, records a miraculous story about a young novice monk who was eight years old and living with an elder arhat. One day, with his miraculous power, the arhat realized that the little monk would die after seven days. The arhat was afraid that his parents would be too sad with his death and even blame the arhat himself for not taking good care of their son. So he asked the young monk to go home to visit his parents. On the way home, the young monk encountered torrential rain and he saw that an ant nest would be washed away by rapids. He thought to himself, "As a Buddhist, I should extend my loving-kindness to all beings and save those who are in danger." So he changed the direction of the water with piles of mud and prevented it from entering the ant nest. Then he went home and stayed with his parents for a few days. As he came back on the eighth day, the arhat was surprised that nothing bad happened to him and that his lifespan had been extended to 80 years. Again with his miraculous power, the arhat found out that his early death was avoided due to the merit of saving all the ants from being drowned. He told everything to the young monk. Deeply touched by the infallible law of karma, the young monk practiced the Dharma diligently and attained arhathood in that very life.

It is always a great merit if we can save beings who are dying or struggling for life. At Larung Gar, whenever there is heavy rain, earthworms would come out from the soil and are often stranded on the roads after the rain has stopped. Monks and nuns will pick them up carefully and move them back to the soil so that they would not be accidentally stepped on by pedestrians or are dehydrated up by the sun. Saving life is true virtue no matter how tiny the life seems to be.

It is often a tradition in many cultures to celebrate the birth of a child with a banquet in which many animals would be slaughtered for the meals. In China, it is customary to cook one chicken a day during the mother's first month after giving birth to boost her energy. As a result, a great number of animals such as chickens, cows, and goats are slaughtered on behalf of the mother and child shortly after a baby is born. The family members think that what they are doing is good for the mother and child but unfortunately their actions would have the opposite effect. Such deeds of killing actually would decrease the lifespan of the mother and child. In many cultures, similar special feasts are also held to remember the deceased. The fact is that these deeds would only increase the negative karma for the deceased and lead to terrible consequences.

Ghost King Presiding Over Life feels very sad for sentient beings' misdeeds as he truly wants to help them live a happy and peaceful life. Yet, he finds it difficult to do so because they are inclined to create negative karma due to their ignorance. Even the ghost king feels powerless to save these poor people. We sometimes see people consume animal products for health reasons. We can only sigh because such negative actions of killing certainly would not extend their lifespan, but rather cause unexpected diseases or even death to them.

The ghost king urges people to perform virtuous deeds for newborns because it brings auspiciousness to the whole household. As it is said, virtues and harmony bring auspiciousness while non-virtues and disharmony bring inauspiciousness. Non-virtuous deeds such as killing create negative karma that will only lead to inauspicious and painful consequences. Conversely, virtuous deeds and kindness bring auspiciousness, peace, and happiness. So doing virtues and accumulating merit at the time of one's birth is of great importance.

**"[...] After the birth, be careful—do not kill or harm [beings] in order to offer fresh meat to the mother, nor gather relatives to drink alcohol, eat meat, sing, and play instruments, for these acts can keep the mother and child from peace and happiness. [...]**



The ghost king lists a few things that should be avoided after the birth of a child, because all these negative acts can keep the mother and child from peace and happiness. Particularly, killing should be avoided by all means because it causes suffering to both the killer and those being killed. In the Chinese Tripitaka, there is a text named *The Condensed Sutra of Causes and Effects*, which is actually a treatise written in verse format expounding causes and their respective effects. It was composed by Bodhisattva Great Courage and translated by Samghavarman in the Liu Song Dynasty. This treatise says,

*For those who desire longevity*

*Not killing sentient beings is the fundamental discipline.*

*Those wise should know the practice of*

*Loving-kindness and compassion and avoid killing.*

For those who desire longevity, a key principle is to not kill or harm any sentient being. In *The Mahasamnipata Sutra*, it is said that all sentient beings cherish their lives the same way we human beings do. Therefore, it is absolutely impossible to gain happiness from killing because it destroys others' happiness. If we want to bring peace and happiness to the mother and child, we should avoid all those negative acts listed by the ghost king, including killing, eating meat, and drinking alcohol. If we cannot refrain from all of these acts, we should at least not kill living creatures to offer fresh meat to the mother and the guests. Frozen meat could be an option. Even though it would still cause negative karma, it would be less than fresh meat.

I had written a booklet, *The Merit of Life Releasing*, in which I cited a few points from Master Lianchi's *On Stopping Killing*. In his essay, Master Lianchi exhorted people to stop killing from seven aspects. I cannot agree more with him that whether it be birthdays or the celebration of a child's birth, banquets or weddings, entertaining guests, or seeking spiritual aid, killing should never be allowed because it is a misdeed. Our own happiness should not be built

upon the suffering of other sentient beings, particularly when that means a loss of life. As a consequence, anyone who commits killing will definitely suffer from its karmic retribution of being killed by others.

## **Suffering Is the Blessing from Guru**

Many of you may have committed a lot of negative karma before you embarked on the Dharma path or before you became a monastic. Among those negativities, some you may remember while others, you may not. Under the influence of your cultural tradition and family education, it is not surprising that in this present life, you have accumulated a large amount of negative karma. If you cannot purify all these negativities while you are still alive, it is hard to say whether you will have other opportunities to purify them in the future. If you are unable to do so, this negative karma could drive you to the lower realms.

Some Buddhists may think that their negative karma has been completely purified shortly after they started to follow Buddhism and they become arrogant just because they are now Buddhists. Some may think that there is no need to worry about negative karma because according to what is taught in Madhyamika or in the Great Perfection, all illusory appearances, including negative karma, do not exist in the primordial wisdom mind. However, the

truth is that as long as one still lives in this phenomenal world and is affected by all kinds of appearances, one does not transcend the conventional phenomena and is still tightly bound by karma. The infallible and irrefutable law of cause and effect still functions on him and he will have to experience the consequences of all his negative actions.

Therefore, it is necessary for us to constantly reflect on our own life, and see what kind of negativity still remains and needs to be purified. For instance, although we are vegetarians, we have been following Buddhism and doing virtuous deeds all day long, we have actually accumulated a great deal of negative karmic seeds in our alaya consciousness, many of which were from our previous lives and are still taking effect in this life. Although we don't remember them, they do exist and will mature into effects when the proper conditions are met, even after countless eons. We would never know which karmic seed will ripen first and what resultant consequence awaits us.

Some Buddhists complain that even though they have learned Buddhism and conducted virtuous actions diligently, they still encounter many unhappy difficulties such as poor health. They then start to doubt whether doing virtuous deeds would really bring good results. They think that all their experiences only result from their deeds in this present life. This shows their ignorance



of how much negative karma they have accumulated since the beginningless time. Indeed, there are innumerable karmic seeds hibernating in our alaya consciousness that would not just disappear on their own. If we do not clear them away by applying the practice of confession and purification, they will for sure ripen into effects in this or future lives.

It is therefore quite necessary to contemplate on the law of cause and effect frequently in our daily life. Personally, I often think of my negative karma when I encounter difficulties. For instance, I have been in poor health for many years. Whenever I do not feel good, I would just remind myself of my negative karma from my previous lifetimes. Although I have not committed any killing in this life, I must have killed or harmed sentient beings in my previous lives so now I have to undergo the retribution of being sick. I am not just saying these words theoretically, I truly believe this deep down and I would never complain about my misfortune in my health or that the Three Jewels have failed to bless me.

In biographies of some of the great masters in the past, such as Gotsangpa Gonpa Dorje, they regarded all their experiences as the blessing from their guru. It is easy for us ordinary practitioners to attribute happy experiences to the blessing from our guru. However, these great masters also regarded every painful experience as a special blessing from their guru. When we are stricken with bad

experiences, would we think of them as the blessing from our guru and the Three Jewels and show our gratitude? We should contemplate this question.

The fact is that there are good reasons for us to accept that suffering is the blessing from our guru. On the one hand, suffering causes us to generate a sincere and non-deceptive mind of renunciation toward this phenomenal world; on the other hand, the experience of suffering helps us exhaust our negative karma which will otherwise cause us to fall into hell. Since these temporary sufferings we experience in this life have such great value, they must be the blessing from our guru.

## **What Makes Childbirth Difficult?**

**“[...] Why? During the difficult time of childbirth, there are countless evil ghosts, goblins, and sprites who want to consume the foul blood. I command the local earth spirits of that household early on to protect the mother and child so that they are peaceful and happy, thereby gaining benefits. When people in such households see that the mother and child are peaceful and happy, they should cultivate merit in thanks to the earth spirits. If instead of doing so, they kill, harm, and gather relatives [for feasting], their violations will bring misfortune to themselves, and the mother and child will also be harmed.**

Why do the aforementioned acts keep the mother and child from obtaining peace and happiness? The process of delivering a child is already painful and risky for the mother and child and as Guru Rinpoche said, both the mother and child are risking death during this process. Thanks to modern medical advances, the situation is much safer nowadays. But still, uncountable evil ghosts, goblins, and spirits are attracted by the blood during birth and are gathered around the mother and child. In order to keep the mother and child in peace and happiness, Ghost King Presiding Over Life has requested the local earth spirits to protect them from being harmed by those evil ghosts. In return, family members should perform virtuous deeds to acknowledge these local earth spirits by offering butter lamps, drawing holy images, and reciting sutras and mantras. However, if the family members are ignorant and conduct evil acts, not only would they themselves but also the mother and child would receive retributions and misfortune. The mother and child could be affected by extended illness or even death.

Many sutras state that it would be of great benefit to the mother and child if the mother or other family members recite sutras such as the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*, or the name or mantra of Avalokiteshvara when a child is born. In Tibetan culture, family members will usually take the mother and child to a monastery as

soon as they recover from delivery. They will perform all kinds of virtuous deeds in the monastery to accumulate merit for the mother and child. Also, they will request the monastics to shower and bless the baby, and to recite sutras or confer a longevity empowerment to the baby. These acts are in line with Buddhist teaching and bring harmony to local ghosts and spirits. Such virtuous deeds create favorable conditions for oneself and others to gain happiness and peace.

This is a practical teaching that is applicable in our daily life and addresses our concerns for safety, health, peace, freedom from illness, and so on. We know that childbirth is an occasion for joy in every family, however, due to many people's ignorance, especially their ignorance of the karmic law, they often act in ways that are contrary to what they are seeking. It is indeed unfortunate. With our understanding of the teaching on karma and what are beneficial and what are harmful, we should encourage our relatives and friends to perform virtuous deeds and to refrain from non-virtuous deeds. While some may listen to us and some may not, there is no need for despair. We must remain patient and be kind to them and continue to advise them to perform virtuous things. Significant changes may not happen immediately.

## WHAT SHOULD BE DONE AT THE TIME OF DEATH?

**“Moreover, for people of Jambudvipa who are on the verge of death, regardless of whether they [have done] good or evil, I wish to keep these dying ones from falling into the lower realms; but how much more [can I do so] when they have cultivated roots of goodness and have increased my ability [to help]! [...]**

Ghost King Presiding Over Life is indeed a kind and warm-hearted ghost. He does not want even those who have created evil or done no good to fall into the lower realms, let alone those who have cultivated the roots of goodness. As long as people have performed virtuous deeds, it would increase his ability to help these sentient beings. As mentioned earlier, performing virtuous deeds brings auspiciousness and increases positive energy. If all of us engage in virtuous deeds, the power of kind ghosts and spirits will be enhanced. Whereas if we do non-virtuous deeds and create negative karma, the power of evil ghosts and spirits

who harm sentient beings would also be increased. Ghost King Presiding Over Life says that his power would be enhanced by people's virtuous deeds, and as mentioned in the following text, he hopes sentient beings will follow his words and refrain from non-virtues.

Moreover, people's own inner strength and power will be increased by their virtuous practice. In the Chinese Tripitaka, there is a sutra named *The Buddha Speaks of Fearlessness Sutra* translated by Dharmaraksa in the Western Jin Dynasty. It says,

*I abandon all evils  
And practice all virtues.  
For this reason,  
I have no fear in my life.*

If we abandon non-virtuous deeds and cultivate only virtues, we will not suffer from any fear, whether in our day-to-day life or at the time of birth or death. On the contrary, if we always commit unwholesome actions and seldom practice virtue, we could be afflicted with mental illnesses such as depression, phobia, or various unknown physical illnesses. Since it is very difficult to be completely freed from these diseases, even if we feel better sometimes, we may still be entangled by emotional afflictions or

by evil ghosts, spirits, and demons and be prevented from acting in accordance with our good intentions.

## What Happens at the Time of Death?

**“[...] When a practitioner of good deeds is about to depart this life, there too are hundreds of thousands of ghosts and spirits of the lower realms who disguise themselves as his parents or other relatives in an attempt to lead him into the lower realms. How much more is this the case for those who have done evil!**



It is said in tantras, especially in the teachings of bardo, that people would be confronted with a complex situation at the time of death. At that critical moment, a large number of evil ghosts and spirits

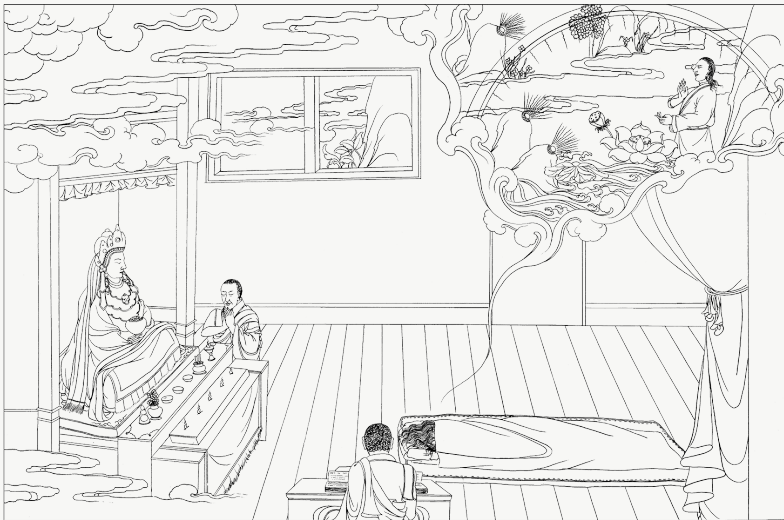
would come forward to disturb the dying person. If the dying person has strong attachment to his parents, relatives, or friends, such attachment would cause him to see these ghosts and spirits exactly as the people to whom he is most attached. He would see these people greeting and welcoming him but actually they are ghosts and spirits in disguise who are trying to lead him to the lower realms. That is the situation for those who have engaged in virtuous deeds. Without any protection, they could be misled and lose their opportunity to take birth in the pure land. How much worst would it be for those who have done non-virtuous deeds and held wrong views and what horrible fate would await them?

In general, people who have done a great deal of virtuous deeds would not be easily influenced by such appearances at the time of death. However, people with negative karma and wrong views could be misled at that time. Therefore, it is critical for us to accumulate virtues when we are alive, and we need to diligently contemplate the impermanence of death and to cultivate confidence in the guru and Three Jewels. If we sincerely pray to them and rely on their power, we can be saved from such situation. If we are about to fall into the lower realms in our bardo state, our guru would come and call us with the secret names we have received from his empowerment. If we have deep faith in him, we would naturally follow his instruction and take birth in the pure land or



directly attain liberation. Therefore, for the sake of our next life, it is crucial for us to develop confidence and devotion to our guru.

**“World-Honored One, when such a man or woman of Jambudvīpa is on the verge of death, his consciousness is confused and dim, he is unable to distinguish between good and evil, and his eyes and ears are unable to see and hear. His relatives should then make great offerings, recite the sacred sutras, and recite the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Such wholesome conditions can cause the departed one to keep away from the lower realms, and the demons, ghosts, and spirits will all withdraw and disperse.**



It is also stated in the teachings on bardo that when one is dying, one will first go through the process of dissolution. There are many stages in the process of dissolution, but to make it easy to understand, it can be divided into three stages. The first stage is the dissolution of the five sense faculties of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Next is the dissolution of the four great elements. After that, one will experience the phases of clarity, increase, and attainment. During the attainment phase, one's red and white elements would meet at the heart. The consciousness would enter into them, whereby a state without any thought is experienced and then one would faint away into a state of utter darkness. After he wakes up, he has reached the bardo state and as stated in tantras, he has gained greater clarity than in life. He would be many times cleverer and his memory would be many times better than while he was alive, and he can see and hear at much greater distances.

Death and after-death experiences can be a relatively long process and each sentient being would experience them differently due to their individual karma. Here in the text, *Ghost King Presiding Over Life* mainly stresses the situation that people in the bardo state are confused and dim, and unable to distinguish between good and evil. So he suggests when one is on the verge of death, his relatives practice virtuous deeds such as making great offerings,

reciting sacred sutras such as the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha* and *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, and reciting the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas for him. Han Buddhism has maintained the tradition of chanting Amitabha Buddha for the deceased. By doing so, all evil ghosts and spirits will withdraw and the dying one will not fall into the three lower realms. This is of great importance.

Some people don't pay much attention to these practices when their family members die. This is a great pity. When one departs this life, everything he has owned will be left behind. No matter if it is a lavish house or a luxury car, a tiny needle, or a short thread, one cannot take anything to his next life. At that time, what one needs most is merit. Thus it is quite necessary to perform virtues on behalf of the dying or the departed one to accumulate merit for them.

Tibetan people have a great tradition in creating wholesome conditions for people who are dying. When someone is about to die, his family members will invite monastics to their home to recite *The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* for forty-nine days. They do not wait until the person is dead to perform virtuous deeds such as making offerings to monastics or requesting monastics to recite sutras. When someone has little hope of survival, his family

would immediately invite monastics to recite sutras and mantras. This Tibetan custom can be of great benefit to the dying.

In the *Sutra on Impermanence* translated by Yijing in the Tang Dynasty, the actions that should be taken when someone is dying are described. I feel that this is a really important sutra for everyone to study when you have the opportunity. The sutra says that when someone is on the verge of death and he wants to avoid falling into the lower realms, he should have the opportunity to see the image of buddhas and bodhisattvas, to take refuge and confess his misdeeds, to recite the buddhas' names and observe precepts, and to generate bodhicitta. It also expounds on how the belongings of the deceased should be distributed to generate the most benefit. In the end of the sutra, it says, "For the deceased, read the *Sutra on Impermanence*. A filial son should stop grieving and wailing lamentations." The sutra suggests that the family should recite the *Sutra on Impermanence* and they should also control their grief. This clear scriptural reference supports the concept that one should not cry at someone's death to avoid disturbing the dead on the path to taking rebirth in the pure land.

There are folk customs that are well-grounded in the Dharma while others are not. The first category are those that have solid scriptural references or are derived from spiritual realization or life experience of great masters. For example, it is customary among

Tibetan Buddhists that one should not make prostration to his guru when he is about to leave for another place because it can be taken to mean that the disciple would not be able to meet the guru again in the future. I have read the biography of a previous master saying that he prostrated to his guru when he departed, and then unfortunately he never saw his guru again. There are also some sayings or views without reliable basis. For example, some Buddhists claim that one should not do *sur offering* at home, or else ghosts and spirits will come to one's home and cause danger. But indeed, ghosts and spirits do have their own power to come and go freely. Your *sur offering* to them would bring them benefit and not any harm to yourself.

Another related sutra we studied previously, *The Noble Mahayana Sutra: The Wisdom of the Hour of Death*, also has supreme teaching on how to view the mind at the moment of death. In the sutra the Buddha says, "As for the wisdom of the hour of death, you should cultivate the perception of insubstantiality, since all phenomena are naturally pure. You should cultivate the perception of great compassion since all phenomena are contained within bodhicitta. You should cultivate the perception of referencelessness since all phenomena are naturally luminous. You should cultivate the perception of utter non-attachment since all things are

impermanent. You should cultivate the perception of not searching for buddhahood elsewhere, since the mind is wisdom when realized.”

## **What Is the Most Beneficial upon Death?**

**“World-Honored One, all living beings who are nearing the time of death, if they are able to hear a Buddha’s name, a Bodhisattva’s name, or a sentence or a verse from the Mahayana sutras, I observe that such people—excepting those with [any of] the five great violations of killing and harming that lead to incessant torments—those who have small unwholesome karma, which would otherwise cause them to fall into the lower realms, will obtain release quickly.”**

The ghost king mentioned several ways through which beings at the time of death can be protected from falling into the lower realms and obtain liberation. If on the verge of death, beings of any kind have an opportunity to hear the name of a buddha, for example, Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Ratnasikhi, Buddha Shakyamuni, or the name of a bodhisattva, such as Ksitigarbha, Avalokiteshvara, or Mahasthamaprapta, then these beings will be liberated from the negative karma that would have otherwise caused them to fall into the lower realms, as long as they have not committed the five crimes of immediate retribution. The same is for anyone

who is able to hear a verse or a sentence of a Mahayana sutra, for example a sentence from the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* or a teaching from the *Diamond Sutra*, such as “All compounded phenomena are like a dream, a magical illusion, a bubble, a shadow, like dew or a flash of lightning. Thus should you contemplate them.”

This says that it is necessary and helpful for us to recite the name of buddhas and bodhisattvas for sentient beings when they are on the verge of death. At the end of 2018, I was staying in the Han region and I got a severe case of the flu. After several days, I had to go to see a doctor. Since there was no major hospital around, I could only go to a local clinic early one morning. There were many people at the clinic and I had to wait in a queue for a long time. When it was my turn, someone suddenly shouted, “Emergency, come help me!” The doctor stood up immediately and ran to the patient who needed emergency care. I then went to another queue and waited for another hour or more. When it was finally my turn again, another emergency appeared and the patient was in a critical condition. I eventually realized that I would not be able to see a doctor that day. Even more sadly, I noticed that the two individuals who needed emergency rescue had died and their bodies were lying nearby. So I just went over and recited prayers for them. One of the families seemed to have a little spiritual faith and was grateful for my chanting. The other family, however, looked at

me with loathing. Either way, I kept on chanting for a while and then went home without getting to see a doctor.

We should always recite sutras or the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas when a human being or any other sentient being is dying and try our best to guide them across. It does not matter whether we are invited or not. Even if we could only recite one name, one sentence, or one verse from the Mahayana sutras, it would generate great merit for the dying. In the *Mahayana Vaipulya Sutra of Treasure Light of Dharani*, it says,

*If the dying one recites the name of a buddha  
Or generates love and respect toward the image of a buddha,  
Then the buddha will save him to the buddha land,  
Where all buddhas will teach the Dharma to him.*

Reciting the names of buddhas or bodhisattvas and chanting the Mahayana sutras can generate inconceivable benefit for the dying. In the *Brief Records of Efficacy of the Three Jewels*, there is a story of a person who was saved from the retribution of the Avici Hell by hearing only one term from a Mahayana sutra.

In the city of Yangzhou, there was a lay Buddhist who did not accept the view taught in the *Nirvana Sutra* that buddha nature is permanent. He doubted the teaching in the sutra which says



that one would not fall into the lower realms but rather take rebirth in the celestial realm by just hearing the term “permanence” regarding buddha nature. He believed that it was already extremely difficult to be freed from the lower realms by hearing a complete sutra, let alone by just hearing a single term. When this person died, his chest remained warm so his family did not bury him. Seven days later, he was resurrected and told his experience to his family. He went to the place of King Yama and King Yama told him that because he slandered the profound Mahayana sutra, he would take his retribution in the Avici Hell. Then he thought about the law of cause and effect and said to King Yama, “If I have to fall into the Avici Hell because I have slandered the Mahayana sutra, then I should be freed from it because I have heard the term ‘permanence’.” At that time, rays of light suddenly appeared in the vast expanse, and from the light there was a voice saying,

*Whether one believes it or not,  
As long as one hears the term “permanence,”  
One will not fall into the lower realms  
But rather take rebirth in the pure land of Akshobhya Buddha.*

Hearing this verse, King Yama gladly released him and when he was resurrected, he tearfully shared his experience. From then on, he generated great faith in Mahayana and practiced the Dharma

diligently. After he died, he was reborn in the pure land of Akshobhya Buddha.

In the *Uttaratantra Shastra*, terms such as tathagatagarbha, buddha nature, or teachings such as “buddha nature is untainted” are often mentioned. Upon hearing either a term or a sentence, although they are short, one will nonetheless gain great benefit of liberation. The same for “Namo Buddhaya,” which has great power to benefit those who hear or recite it. Just like the aforementioned lay Buddhist, we may wonder how is it possible to gain great merit by just hearing a few words? In fact, whether a term or a sentence is of great benefit or not has nothing to do with its length. Like medicine pills, some of them are very small but by taking them, patients will recover from serious illness. Likewise, the name of a buddha or a bodhisattva, or a term or a sentence from the Mahayana sutras could have great power and blessing.

If we see any sentient being nearing death, we should recite sutras or the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas for them. We should try our best to help them because it can be particularly important for anyone, Buddhists or non-Buddhists alike. We encourage Dharma practitioners to recite prayers for those who are dying so that they can obtain a good rebirth. It takes very little time to recite prayers or sutras such as the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Amitabha Sutra*, or the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, and yet the power generated by doing so can

greatly benefit their future lives, may be even saving them from the lower realms for numerous eons. This is truly meaningful to the deceased and his family.

In order to truly benefit the dead through the chanting of prayers, we need first to develop a strong conviction on such practice ourselves. As a Buddhist, it is indispensable to cultivate a devoted faith in Buddhist teachings. Faith is the mother that gives birth to all kinds of merit. Without faith, academic research or dualistic thinking alone will never help us understand or accept many teachings, for example, the relationships between one thing and another, or how one practice could bring a specific result. Faith plays a vital role on the path to liberation. Without it, liberation becomes impossible to attain.

## GENUINE IDENTITY OF GHOST KING PRESIDING OVER LIFE

The Buddha told Ghost King Presiding Over Life, “Because of your great kindness, you are able to make such great vows and protect all beings amid their births and deaths. In the future when men and women reach their time of birth and death, do not retreat from your vows; be sure to cause all of them to be liberated and gain eternal peace and happiness.”

The ghost king said to the Buddha, “Please do not be concerned. Until the end of my present form, in every thought I will support and protect living beings of Jambudvipa so that they gain peace and happiness both at the time of birth and the time of death. I only wish that at the time of birth and death, these living beings will believe and accept my words, so that they will all be liberated and gain great benefits.”



The Buddha praised this ghost king for his great vows to protect sentient beings at the time of birth and death. Although he appears in the form of a ghost, he is actually a great bodhisattva. Just as it is very important to have a capable and trustworthy official appointed to a critical position, Ghost King Presiding Over Life will greatly benefit beings of Jambudvīpa because of his incredible kindness and compassion as he takes charge of their crucial moments of birth and death.

The Buddha knows that his work is not easy because sentient beings in this world are stubborn and difficult to convert. No matter how kindly they are treated, not only will they not repay the kindness of others, they often cause more trouble. That is why

the Buddha consoled the ghost king and exhorted him never to retreat from his great vows in any situation. The Buddha asked him to continue to support and protect sentient beings at the time of their birth and death so that they will be liberated and gain peace and happiness.

We have already seen that the Buddha had requested Universally Vast to use myriads of skillful means to encourage people not to retreat from the Ksitigarbha practice. Here the Buddha earnestly reminded Ghost King Presiding Over Life not to retreat from his great vows. Indeed, it is of great importance that a practitioner maintains his devotion and exercises his diligence in Dharma practice and keeps it from fading. Many of us may have made great aspirations when we embarked on our spiritual path. But when we encounter obstacles from time to time, our aspirations can easily wear off and we may regress either from our volunteer jobs or from the long-term Dharma activities of benefiting sentient beings. As ordinary practitioners, our ability is limited and our mental states are not as stable as buddhas and bodhisattvas. We can be easily influenced by the external world that causes us to waver from our original intentions. If at that moment, we are reminded by buddhas and bodhisattvas, we will not retreat from our initial aspirations.

Since most of us do not have the merit to warrant a direct reminder by buddhas and bodhisattvas, I encourage you to listen to Dharma teachings on a regular basis and stay with Dharma teachers and virtuous spiritual friends because they can help remind you of what you need to do. The Buddha's reminder to the ghost king here is in fact an indirect reminder to us to try our best not to retreat from our Mahayana vows and not to lose passion in our Dharma activities. As long as we can benefit others, even though what we can do may be quite small and trivial, it is still meaningful and worthy of our perseverance.

Ghost King Presiding Over Life assures the Buddha that he will support and protect sentient beings his whole life. The phrase "until the end of one's present form" is mentioned a lot in the pratimoksha vows, which means one's whole life with the present physical body. The ghost king asked the Buddha not to be concerned as he has the firmest commitment that as long as sentient beings believe and accept his words, abandoning non-virtuous deeds and cultivating virtuous deeds at the time of their birth and death, all of them will be liberated and gain peace and happiness. His sincerest wish for all beings in this world is for them to accept and follow his words. Many of the Buddha's followers, including ghosts, spirits, or human beings who have also vowed to help sentient beings

also assured the Buddha that they would endeavor to accomplish everything that the Buddha had asked them to do.



**At that time the Buddha said to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, “This great ghost king, Presiding Over Life, has passed through hundreds of thousands of lives as a great ghost king, supporting and protecting living beings amid their births and deaths. It is only because of this Great Being’s compassionate vows that he manifests in the form of a great ghost. In reality, he is not a ghost. After one hundred and seventy kalpas, he will become a Buddha named Signless Tathagata, his kalpa will be called Peace and Happiness, and his world will be named Pure Dwelling. The lifespan of that Buddha will be incalculable kalpas.**



**“Ksitigarbha, so inconceivable are the matters about this great ghost king. The devas and humans whom he guides across, too, are immeasurable.”**

At the end of the conversation, the Buddha revealed the true identity of the great ghost king Presiding Over Life. He is indeed a great bodhisattva and because of his great kindness, compassion, and aspiration, he appears as a ghost king for hundreds of thousands of lives to save living beings amid their births and deaths. Likewise, some Dharma protectors manifest in the forms of ghosts and spirits, or even demons. But in reality, they are not these kinds of sentient beings. We are usually afraid of ghosts and spirits as they look ferocious. Yet, some of them are indeed more compassionate than us human beings. As human beings, we may not pay attention to others’ births and deaths, but this great ghost king has been making great efforts on the two critical moments of living beings. Because of his great compassion and power, he has guided across immeasurable sentient beings.

In this lecture we have covered the Ghost King Presiding Over Life in depth. In addition to this ghost king, there are many other ghost kings mentioned in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* who have also vowed to protect and benefit sentient beings. The sutra also mentions a great number of spirits, such as earth spirits, mountain spirits, and tree spirits, most of whom are very kind and possess bodhicitta.

Because they all harbor good intentions to benefit others, there is no need to fear them.

Many people are afraid of ghosts and spirits and fear that they may be around them. On a certain level, we can say that ghosts and spirits are indeed the manifestations of the mind. As long as you realize their empty nature, they will not be able to harm you. But if you truly believe the world is full of ghosts and spirits and perceive whoever you encounter as demons or ghosts, or bad guys and vicious persons, your world will become a place full of hostile enemies. Ultimately, all phenomena are pure by nature and are none other than the display of our primordial wisdom. If one achieves a high-level of practice with profound realization, one would perceive all phenomena as buddhas, bodhisattvas and pure lands. We should endeavor to achieve such a state of realization.



## Chapter Nine

*Reciting the Names of Buddhas*

Buddha names are all endowed with inconceivable blessing and definitely bring great benefits, regardless of who chant them. It is like medicine. As long as it is properly made or manufactured, it works for its corresponding disease. If you get an illness whose antidote is this medicine, then as long as you take it, you will get better and it does not matter who brings you this medicine, either a doctor or a nurse. The same for buddha names. Anyone can benefit from hearing a buddha name and it does not matter who makes them hear it.

—Khenpo Sodargye

# Lecture Nineteen

August 22nd, 2020

## BE GRATEFUL, DILIGENT, AND RELAXED

We will continue our study of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. So far, our schedule for next week will remain the same as this week and we will study the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* next Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. This could change after one week. Ideally, we would continue with the courses that we have not finished yet, including *The Uttaratantra Shastra*, *The Shurangama Sutra*, and *The Analects of Confucius*. But due to the COVID pandemic and other unexpected circumstances, we will not be able to live stream the teaching as before. If I go ahead and teach them now, many who have followed these teachings will miss the lectures. Therefore, I plan to continue with them later this year or next year when the overall situation would hopefully improve. I will try my best to complete these teachings, as I have vowed, in this life.

## Treasure the Favorable Condition for Dharma Study

Because of current conditions, not only my teaching but the teachings of other khenpos and khenmos cannot be readily scheduled. Group studies such as tutorials, discussions, and debates cannot be offered as in the past. Still, we can consider ourselves fortunate that our Dharma studies are still possible with only minor adjustments and that most practitioners are able to continue their own Dharma studies provided that they are self-disciplined and can manage their time.

During a Dharma study, it is essential for us to maintain a stable and undisturbed mind so that we can hear and contemplate the teaching meticulously. This also applies to those who have also volunteered to serve the sangha in addition to their studies. While you perform your duties, you should also strive to stay current with your study. Those who are capable manage to perform well in both their volunteer service and their Dharma study and practice. On the contrary, some fail to have an acceptable result in every aspect, performing poorly in volunteering and in the study and practice of the Dharma. The point is that we should pay attention to every task we have and try our best to perform at the highest level.

I have heard that certain individuals applied to be a volunteer just to earn a free meal. This is an impure and inferior motive. Such an intention will not accumulate any significant merit. It would be even worse if the individual lacks sufficient efficiency in performing the assigned tasks. A better attitude is to think, “This meal is to nourish my body so that I can provide better service.” I commend those who pursue a work-study program for the Dharma. Many people complete their academic studies in Chinese and foreign educational institutions this way. It is good that you study the Dharma while also engaging in volunteer work with an altruistic motive. You will enrich your knowledge in the Dharma while also accumulating a great deal of merit.

## **Be Content, Joyful, and Relaxed**

This is a very unusual year as the world struggles to survive an unprecedented pandemic. Every one of us should treasure whatever we still have. Ashvaghosha says in his *Sutralankara*,

*No illness is the foremost benefit.*

*Being content is the wealthiest.*

*Virtuous friend is the best relative.*

*Nirvana is the utmost happiness.*



This is a thought-provoking teaching. Indeed, the greatest benefit we can hope to have is to live in this world in good health. Even when we may only have life's necessity and are not materially well-off, if our hearts are filled with contentment and not swell with desires, we are indeed the richest. If we have qualified spiritual teachers or friends who can influence us toward virtue and goodness, they will indeed be our best relatives. In this verse, the last sentence concerning nirvana is perhaps farthest from our reach, regardless if it were the enlightenment of a shravaka, pratyekabuddha, or bodhisattva. Most of us here are fortunate to possess the former three. We are healthy without illness; we are not facing a lot of pressure for surviving; and we have encountered many virtuous Dharma friends. What more can we ask? We have the opportunity to study and practice the Dharma freely! We should all be happy that we live in such a favorable circumstance.

Of course, we should never be overly attached to what we have because it could often lead to suffering. Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyeltsen said in his *Treasury of Good Advice*,

*When love is lavished excessively,  
That in itself generates hostility.  
Most of the disputes in this world  
Derive from close relationships.*

Excessive attachment can become the source of resentment or hatred. Whatever we grasp strongly onto, position power, reputation, a friend, or a lover, it can bring about confusion and bitterness. Therefore, treasure all propitious resources we have at hand but do not grasp too tightly onto them so that we would not sink into a negative mental state that can lead us to affliction.

In a word, be joyful and relaxed. To be relaxed is of great and profound meaning. Regardless of whether it is at work or in your daily life, dealing with family affairs, or engaging in Dharma study and practice, do not be too anxious and attached. Too much stress can have many harmful effects—it may impair our health, result in negative emotions, and quite likely lead to bad appetite and poor sleep. Therefore, it is important to learn to relax in life.

## EFFICACY STORY: A FISHERMAN NETTED A STATUE OF Ksitigarbha

Before today's teaching, I would like to share another story of Ksitigarbha. Once upon a time, there was a state called Ming in old China where people made their living by fishing. One day, a fisherman netted a statue when he cast his net in the sea. The statue seemed to be an image of a monk. Failing to figure out what it was, he discarded it at the shore. Then that night, he had a dream in which a monk of amazing radiance asked him, "Why did you throw me away?" The fisherman asked, "Dear master, who are you?" The monk said, "I am Ksitigarbha. I have been benefiting living beings in the ocean. Through my efforts, half of the living beings there have taken rebirth in the celestial realm. I have become concerned about you and your people so I came into your net."

The fisherman then woke up and felt very regretful. He repented immediately and went to retrieve the statue. Thereafter, he built a shrine to worship the Ksitigarbha statue. Many fishermen paid

homage to the statue which was endowed with great blessing and miraculous power. It brought infinite benefits to the local people for many generations.

From this story, we learn that Ksitigarbha endeavors to benefit sentient beings of all forms, be they animals or humans, on land or at sea. Indeed, the merit and virtue of buddhas and bodhisattvas are truly inconceivable. With our conviction on their merits and virtues and our goal of promoting the Dharma and benefiting beings around us, we should strive to create favorable conditions for other people to make connections with buddhas and bodhisattvas so that they can be saved and inspired by them. Although each of us has different abilities, we should all aspire to spread the names or images of buddhas and bodhisattvas to as many beings as we can.

While it may be difficult to build a formal Buddhist temple in certain places where people usually would not have a chance to hear the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas, it is still of great benefit to build a simple shrine to place images of buddhas or bodhisattvas inside. For instance, in some Han regions where people do not embrace Buddhism, you may build a Dragon King Temple by following their folklore while enshrining a Ksitigarbha statue inside, which will indeed bring them benefits. After all, Ksitigarbha manifests in all different forms in various circumstances.

Or, in some other regions where even a shrine is not allowed, you can place the images of noble figures such as Ksitigarbha or Buddha Shakyamuni somewhere obvious in common facilities such as restaurants, coffee shops, or bookstores. Even though many people do not have any faith at all, as long as they pass by and see the images, directly or indirectly they will gain great benefits.

Likewise, if your family members are not so opposed to Buddhism, you may create a shrine at home and worship, for instance, a Ksitigarbha statue so that all family members and guests can see and get connected with Ksitigarbha. As monastics, you should use the holy statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas to bless those who come to your monastery. In certain southern regions in China like Fujian, Buddhists are used to bringing their own buddha statues with them when they visit temples. They place the holy statues of their personal collections in front of the statues in the temples for a short while and then take them home. I am not particularly sure if it is a way to receive blessings or for the statues to be consecrated but they have such customs.

## THE REQUEST OF KSITIGARBHA

Now we continue with the ninth chapter, *Reciting the Names of Buddhas*, which discusses the names and merits of ten buddhas. When I translated Ju Mipham Rinpoche's *A Garland of Jewels: Names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas*, I asked everyone to recite the names of the buddhas on a regular basis or every now and then. Because the names of buddhas or bodhisattvas are endowed with great blessing, chanting these names would accumulate incredible merit.

In Master Faxian's translation of *The Mahaparinirvana Sutra (the three fascicles edition)*, there is a teaching that says, "In hundreds of thousands of kalpas, to hear a buddha's name is rare." Given that it had been extremely difficult to hear a buddha's name throughout hundreds of thousands of eons, we should feel very fortunate that we can hear in this life the names of Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Shakyamuni, and those in this chapter that we are about to cover. This is indeed a good fortune for us.

On the one hand, we have been born into an uncertain and confusing world where evil karma can be overwhelming and negative emotions and afflictions can haunt everyone's mind, causing us untold suffering. On the other hand, we are also living in a bright period in this kalpa when Dharma teachings and the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas remain fully approachable and that the Dharma is still very much relevant.

We need to recognize our good fortune and cherish our human existence and all the favorable conditions that are available to us to pursue our Dharma study. Although I am not that excellent a practitioner, I have encountered such wonderful scriptures and propitious Buddhist statues that even if I only make three prostrations to them every day that it would carry great significance. However, the human body we have obtained is impermanent and fragile, and no one can be certain of when his or her human life will end. All we can do for the moment is to make full use of our energy to engage in Dharma study and practice with this precious human body so as to attain true freedom from samsara.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **Reciting the Names of Buddhas**

**At that time, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva said to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, for living beings in the future**

I will now expound on beneficial matters, so that they may obtain great benefits while in the cycle of birth and death. O World-Honored One, please allow me to speak on this.”

The Buddha told Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, “You now give rise to vast kindness and compassion to rescue all wrongdoing suffering beings in the six realms of existence, wishing to expound on inconceivable matters. This is the right time. You should speak at once, for I will enter parinirvana before long. [Such matters] will let you fulfill your vows early, and I too will have no worry about all the beings in the present and future.”





Ksitigarbha requested the Buddha to give him permission to deliver Mahayana teachings to benefit future beings. Usually, it is the Buddha who would give teachings to others. In this case, it was Ksitigarbha who explained the Dharma and the Buddha was just part of the audience. The Buddha gave the permission by saying that “This is the right time.” Regardless of whether it is giving or receiving Dharma teachings, as soon as conditions are favorable for them to be realized, we need to grasp the opportunity and do not procrastinate and miss “the right time” to make progress.

Here the Buddha mentioned that he would enter parinirvana very soon. I am uncertain exactly when the Buddha taught the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. Historically, after the Buddha attained buddhahood, he first returned to his kingdom to enlighten his father, King Suddhodana. Later, he ascended to the Trayastrimsa Heaven to benefit his mother, Queen Maya, who died seven days after giving birth to him and had taken rebirth into that heaven.

As for when the latter took place, there are different claims. Some sources suggest that the Buddha’s ascendance to the Trayastrimsa Heaven took place seven years after his enlightenment. Yet this claim seems to be incompatible with the text here, which states that the Buddha’s teaching to her mother was near the time of his parinirvana. According to some Mahayana sutras such as the *Mahamaya Sutra*, the Buddha stayed three months at the Trayastrimsa

Heaven for a summer retreat, in order to benefit his mother and the celestial beings. Then after that, he returned to Jambudvīpa and soon afterward entered into parinirvana. This means that the teaching in the heaven took place at the later stage of the Buddha's life, which is consistent with the texts here.

Such being the case, a more logical conclusion is that after enlightenment, the Buddha first turned the Wheel of Dharma in the human world, and when that was nearly completed, he rose to the celestial realm to teach the Dharma to non-human beings.

This reminds me that the Festival of the Descent from Heaven is the last of the four major Buddhist festivals during the lunar year. The first is Chotrul Duchen, the Festival of Miracles, which commemorates the days when the Buddha displayed the miracle to subjugate tirthikas. It occurs on the full moon (the fifteenth day) of the first Tibetan month. The second is Saga Dawa Duchen, the Festival of Vaishakha, which celebrates Buddha Shakyamuni's achieving full enlightenment and entering parinirvana. Both occur on the same day of the full moon (the 15th day) of the fourth Tibetan lunar month. The third is Chokhor Duchen, the Festival of Turning the Wheel of Dharma, which occurs on the fourth day of the sixth Tibetan lunar month. The last is Lha Bab Duchen, the Festival of the Descent from Heaven, which marks the day when the Buddha returned to this human world after staying in the

celestial realm to benefit his mother and the gods. It occurs on the 22nd day of the ninth Tibetan month.

Following these four festivals, four great Dharma assemblies are held at Larung Gar every year. They are the Vidyadharas Dharma Assembly for magnetizing activities in the first Tibetan month, the Vajrasattva Dharma Assembly for purifying negativities in the fourth Tibetan month, the Ksitigarbha Dharma Assembly for accumulating great merit in the sixth Tibetan month, as well as the Amitabha Dharma Assembly for taking rebirth in the pure land in the ninth Tibetan month.

We can see from the text that when the Buddha was about to enter nirvana, he cared deeply about all the sentient beings of this degenerate age, both in the present and in the future. Like an old mother who is about to pass away worries about her children, the Buddha appeared to also have some concerns that needed to be addressed at his parinirvana. It was not about himself, but on how sentient beings would be cared for. In Dharmakshema's translation of *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, it says,

*The Tathagata suffers from hardships and he feels it not.*

*He looks upon the pains of beings as he does the pains of his own.*

Since the Buddha has already annihilated suffering and its origin, he does not experience any affliction himself. However, when he sees the agony of sentient beings in the six samsaric realms, his universal compassion makes him feel their pain as if it is his own. All other buddhas and bodhisattvas are also the same. But unlike ordinary beings who are self-centered and constantly suffer from attachment to their own ego, the pain buddhas and bodhisattvas feel is never based on their concern for themselves.

During one of my trips, I was at a master's teaching and something he said really struck me and I could not agree with it more. He said that when a teacher was giving teachings and he frequently used the word "I", it meant that this teacher had a strong ego. Because how one talks is really determined by how one thinks. If someone always thinks of himself, it is a certainty that he would frequently use the word "I" in his speech.

A person with strong ego is filled with misery and that is what plagues most ordinary beings. The tears we shed, the sentiments we exude, and the agony we experience, are all rooted in self-centeredness. As ordinary beings, none of our afflictions originates from our consideration for others. But buddhas and bodhisattvas are completely different. What they cannot bear is the suffering of every sentient being. They feel acute pain for the plight of other sentient beings but they are not concerned with their own suffering,

even as agonizing as having their bodies being sliced up into pieces.

As stated in the *Introduction to the Middle Way*,

*Their foes may torture them, though they be innocent,  
Dismembering their bodies piece by piece,  
And cut their flesh and bones in lingering pain—  
But this serves only to confirm their patience for their butchers.*

*For Bodhisattvas, those who see the absence of the self,  
Agent, object, time, and manner of the wounds—  
All things are like the image in a glass.  
By understanding thus, all torments are endured.*

The Buddha felt relieved that Ksitigarbha was prepared to expound on the Mahayana teachings for present and future beings. This was because if the virtuous Dharma is taught to sentient beings, they would be able to rely on the Dharma to protect themselves from suffering, even after the Buddha himself has entered Parinirvana.

## RECITING THE NAMES OF BUDDHAS

With the Buddha's permission and encouragement, Ksitigarbha began his teaching focused on the merit of the names of a number of buddhas. Although the Buddha did not appear to have praised Ksitigarbha at the end of this chapter, he had granted his permission and witnessed the entire teaching, indicating that what Ksitigarbha taught was free from any fault or deception.

### Infinite Forms Tathagata

**Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva said to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, in the past, measureless asamkhyeya kalpas ago, there arose in the world a Buddha named Infinite Forms Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha's name and give rise to reverence momentarily, they will transcend forty kalpas of severe torments of samsara. How much more so when they sculpt and paint his image, make offerings, and sing his praises! These people will gain merit that is measureless and boundless.**

From this passage, we can see the benefits of reciting “Namo Infinite Forms Tathagata”. In fact, every Tathagata’s name mentioned in this chapter is meritorious in this respect. I hope everyone will recite these buddhas’ names frequently. Even if one were to only generate reverence toward this buddha briefly, this merit would help a person transcend forty kalpas of severe torments of samsara. If one were to sculpt or paint the image of this tathagata, make offerings to him, and praise him, he or she will obtain limitless merit. I wonder how Infinite Forms Tathagata looks, since without careful observation, we would feel the appearances of many buddhas are quite similar.

Making images of buddhas can bring about immeasurable merit. In the *Exceptional Stories in Sutras and Vinaya Texts*, there is a story about a past life of Buddha Shakyamuni. Once upon a time, there was a great king who ruled 84,000 smaller countries. The king often made offerings to a buddha and his retinue. One day, the king thought to himself, “What a pity it is that people living in the small countries I rule are unable to accumulate merit by attending to the Buddha!” The king commanded artisans and painters to draw images of the Buddha and distributed them to the 84,000 countries for homage. Due to this commendable act, the king later became Buddha Shakyamuni and upon his parinirvana, his relics

were placed into 84,000 reliquary stupas in 84,000 different places worldwide for wide veneration.

Considering the benefit of buddha images, I feel strongly that buddha statues should be built in remote and underdeveloped places where even the names of buddhas have never been heard. I have been to Africa twice and was fortunate to meet a number of Han Chinese monks there. They have done many meritorious deeds in Africa, in particular erecting buddha statues. After seeing what they have done, it occurred to me that it would be good to spend my later years in Africa. There are 54 countries in Africa where most people have never heard the name of any buddha or bodhisattva, let alone seen their images. It is very sad that all sorts of disasters and sufferings continue to befall Africa. If more buddha statues and temples are built there, maybe their unfortunate destiny can be changed in due course.

I do not know how long I will live and as a monk, anywhere can be my home. It makes no difference whether I die in Africa, Europe, or America. I have a strong wish, though it is not yet a clear aspiration that as long as I can benefit the local beings even a little bit, I would like to stay there or even die there. That is what I am yearning for. If there is a chance in the future, I would really like to spend my last days in Africa and let the local people bury my body there. Perhaps they will not be bothered to bury my corpse, just leaving



it alone like what I saw with some of the dead inmates when I visited some of the prisons in Africa. That would also be fine with me.

The point is, we need to make aspirations to promote the Dharma in places where Buddhism is not flourishing. In the Han regions of today's China, it would seem that there are more Dharma masters in prosperous cities than in distant and economically backward places. I do not think that this is due to discrimination by eminent monks and great masters, but the karma of sentient beings at a given place can be a determinant factor. It is possible that beings in these poorer areas have created many seriously negative karma in the past that has led to their current retributions which deprive them of access to the Dharma or wealth and bring them frequent man-made or natural disasters. However, we should try all means to bring the Dharma to these areas to benefit living beings there. Remote places which have not heard buddhas' names deserve our special efforts. For Mahayana Buddhists, this is the foremost important thing that we need to always bear in mind.

## **Jewel Nature Tathagata**

**“Moreover, in the past, as many kalpas ago as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River, there arose in the world a Buddha named Jewel Nature Tathagata. If there are men and women**

who hear this Buddha's name and, within the time of a finger snap, generate the mind to take refuge in him, these people will never fall back or turn away from the Unsurpassed Way.



In the *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra*, Jewel Nature Tathagata is said to dwell in the world of Numerous Jewels, expounding the Dharma of Prajna to innumerable great bodhisattvas. If men or women hear this buddha's name and they think and aspire for even a fleeting moment that "This Jewel Nature Tathagata is remarkable and I want to take refuge in him!", they will never regress from the Mahayana path until ultimate enlightenment is attained. In addition, they will be perfectly endowed with prosperity and wealth in every lifetime henceforth.

In fact, if we were to take refuge in a buddha, no matter who he is, the merit and benefits are indeed boundless. The *Sutra of the Heart of the Sun* says,

*He who has made the Buddha his refuge  
Cannot be killed by ten million demons;  
Though he may transgress his vows or be tormented in mind,  
It is certain that he will go beyond rebirth.*

This verse is also cited in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* to explain the immeasurable benefits of taking refuge. It points out that if we take refuge in the Buddha, even millions of mara and his retinue cannot harm us. And even if we break precepts or are distracted in our mind, we will definitely attain liberation. It is also said in the *Lotus Sutra*,

*Those who, even with distracted minds,  
Entered a stupa compound  
And chanted but once, "Homage to the Buddha!"  
Have certainly attained the path of the buddhas.*

Although the full refuge in Buddhism is the Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, even taking refuge in only one of them would give rise to immense merit and benefits.

## Lotus Excellence Tathagata

**“Moreover, in the past there arose in the world a Buddha named Lotus Excellence Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name, who have the sound pass through their ears, these people will be reborn a thousand times in the six heavens of the desire realm. How much more so when they recite and meditate on his name with a resolute mind!**

According to Sanskrit, this buddha’s name means Red Lotus Excellence. The sutra says that as long as one simply hears his name then the name will enter one’s alaya consciousness and enable the person to take rebirth a thousand times in the six heavens of the desire realm. How much greater the benefit would be if we recite the name with sincere devotion! It would be extremely meaningful to us if we frequently recite “Namo Lotus Excellence Tathagata.”

The name of this buddha is also included in the *Sutra of the Buddha Speaks of Buddha Names*, a scripture translated during the Northern Wei Dynasty by Bodhiruci who is also known for having translated the *Dasabhumika Sutra (Ten Stages Sutra)* into Chinese. This sutra has twelve volumes and mentions about 11,093 buddha names, some of which are transliterated from Sanskrit while some are semantically translated. Many of the lands of the buddhas are also briefly mentioned in the text.

In Chinese Buddhist Canon, there are quite a few sutras that specifically mentioned buddha names. Han Chinese masters and translators must have attached great importance to names of buddhas and bodhisattvas. In comparison, scriptures mentioning buddha names are fewer in the Tibetan Buddhist Canon. Among the few, one well-known scripture is *Chanting the Names of Noble Manjushri*. But the text does not mention many buddha names and just focuses on Manjushri's qualities and aims to help practitioners cultivate wisdom. While it is known as a sutra in the Chinese Tripitaka, it is actually categorized as a tantra in Kangyur.

Anyway, there are various scriptures on buddha names, like *Sutra of the Names of the Thousand Buddhas in the Present Fortunate Kalpa*, *Sutra of the Names of the Thousand Buddhas in the Past Vyuha Kalpa*, and *Sutra of the Names of the Thousand Buddhas in the Future Nakshatra Kalpa*. If you have time, you should look up these scriptures in the Tripitaka and recite the names of these buddhas and bodhisattvas. Although their names seem to be simple collections of a few words, they possess great blessing and can bring about great merit.

## **Lion's Roar Tathagata**

**“Moreover, in the past, inexpressibly-inexpressible asamkhyeya kalpas ago, there arose in the world a Buddha named Lion's Roar Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha's**

**name and in a thought take refuge in him, these people will meet measureless Buddhas who will place their hands on the crowns of their heads and give them prediction.**



I have seen this buddha's name in quite a few sutras in both Tibetan and Chinese Tripitaka. For all men and women, not necessarily a virtuous man or woman, as it is not mentioned in the text, if they hear the name of this buddha and seek to take refuge in him, then innumerable buddhas will touch the crowns of their heads to give them blessings and the prophecy that predicts their future enlightenment. So, it is of great meaning to hear this buddha's name.

## **Krakucchanda Buddha**

**“Moreover, in the past there arose in the world a Buddha named Krakucchanda Buddha. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name, and with a resolute mind, they gaze reverently at and make obeisance to him, or they also sing his praises, these people will be great Brahma kings in the assemblies of the thousand Buddhas of the present kalpa and be given superior prediction.**

Krakucchanda is the very first Buddha in the present Fortunate Kalpa and the fourth of the Seven Heroic Buddhas. The Seven Heroic Buddhas are Buddha Shakyamuni together with the six Buddhas who preceded him. According to certain historical records, this buddha made advent in the world when human’s lifespan was 40,000 years. Of course, there were different claims. A prerequisite for one to receive the blessing from this buddha, according to the text, is to have “a resolute mind”, that is, to be devout and sincere.

## **Vipasyin Buddha**

**“Moreover, in the past there arose in the world a Buddha named Vipasyin [Buddha]. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name, they will never fall into the lower realms and**

**will always be reborn among humans or devas and experience excellent, wonderful happiness.**



Vipasyin Buddha was the first of the Seven Heroic Buddhas. Some texts say that he appeared in the world when human's lifespan was 80,000 years. If there are men or women who hear this buddha's name, those people will be forever prevented from falling into the lower realms, and always be born among humans or gods, enjoying supremely wonderful bliss.

That is the benefit of just hearing this buddha's name and does not require a person to generate faith and devotion. How convenient! On many occasions, whether our Dharma practice succeeds or



not depends on many factors including our sincerity. But once we hear the name of this buddha, we are already guaranteed against falling down, regardless of whether we have faith in him or understand the profound meaning of his name. The names of buddhas and bodhisattvas can carry such inconceivable blessing. Many scriptures, such as *The Sutra of Great Liberation* and *The Sutra of Golden Light*, point out that whoever hears the names of certain buddhas and bodhisattvas will no longer suffer in the three lower realms.

## Jewel Excellence Tathagata

**“Moreover, in the past, as many kalpas ago as there are grains of sand in measureless, countless Ganges Rivers, there arose in the world a Buddha named Jewel Excellence Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name, they will never fall into the lower realms and will frequently be in the heavens and experience excellent, wonderful happiness.**

Jewel Excellence Tathagata is the Buddha Ratnasikhin. Those who hear his name will not fall into the lower realms but always be born in the heavens and experience happiness. In *The Sutra of Golden Light*, there is a story that reflects the great merit of the name of Buddha Ratnasikhin. When Buddha Shakyamuni was teaching this sutra, ten thousand divine gods came to listen in front of the

Buddha. Through listening to the teaching, their minds were rid of shackles and obscurations. Seeing this, the Buddha gave them the prophecy of attaining buddhahood in the future. Then, a tree deity asked the Buddha what virtue the ten thousand gods had done that they could receive prophecy from the Buddha so easily, just after hearing a teaching.

The Buddha then told the following story. In the past, there was a man called Jalavahana. As the son of a medical man, Jalavahana compassionately healed everyone in his country from illness and thus earned everyone's respect. One day he came to a forest and saw a great pool where there lived ten thousand fish. For some reason, the pool was almost dry and the ten thousand fish were dying. Full of compassion, he worked to fetch enough water to fill the pool and to save those fish. Not only that, he also brought food to satisfy them.

It occurred to him that he had heard at a forest retreat a monk recite the Mahayana sutras, which said, "Whoever should at the time of death hear the name of Tathagata Ratnasikhin will be reborn in the blissful world of heaven." He decided to introduce to the fish the profound law of dependent arising. Then, he went into the pool and chanted the name of Tathagata Ratnasikhin and expounded the Dharma to the fish. Later, when the fish in the pool died, they were reborn as gods in the Trayastrimsa Heaven.

The Buddha told the tree deity that Jalavahana are now the Buddha himself and the ten thousand fish are now the ten thousand divine gods. It was all because they had heard the Dharma and the name of Ratnasikhin from Jalavahana in the past that now they can receive such a prophecy from the Buddha in this life. That is the benefit of hearing the name of Buddha Ratnasikhin. If we chant this name to other sentient beings, especially animals, these beings will never fall into the lower realms. It is therefore of great importance to let others hear the name of this buddha.

From time to time, people will ask me to guide across the deceased. At times, they would like me to perform the ritual of phowa. While phowa is beneficial, it requires the performer to have attained a high level of spiritual realization and not everyone is capable of doing this. Comparatively, reciting buddha names is much easier for everyone. Therefore, I would often recite the buddha names that I am familiar with, particularly Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Shakyamuni, and Buddha Ratnasikhin for deceased humans or animals. If I have time, I will also recite the names of the Seven Medicine Buddhas and the Eight Great Bodhisattvas. As Buddhists, whenever we encounter sentient beings who are dying or in a critical condition, please chant some buddha names with a kind heart for them to hear, regardless of whether you are asked or not. This will most certainly be beneficial to them.

Buddha names are all endowed with inconceivable blessing and definitely bring great benefits, regardless of who chant them. It is like medicine. As long as it is properly made or manufactured, it works for its corresponding disease. If you get an illness whose antidote is this medicine, then as long as you take it, you will get better and it does not matter who brings you this medicine, either a doctor or a nurse. The same for buddha names. Anyone can benefit from hearing a buddha name and it does not matter who makes them hear it. Moreover, unlike worldly drugs, buddha names are sublime medicine that causes no side effects to any being.

However, to generate such a conviction, we Buddhists must first understand the superiority of buddha names. Be aware that all buddhas have perfected their accumulation of wisdom and merit through hundreds of thousands of eons of spiritual practice. Because of that, after they attain buddhahood, their names carry inconceivable power and blessing that an ordinary being's name cannot possibly provide.

Personally, I believe even the names of great masters, like our root guru H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, are exceptional. Even though His Holiness passed into nirvana, as long as his name exists in the world, whoever calls or hears his name will have the root of virtue planted in their alaya consciousnesses. For example, every day we recite the supplication prayer of His Holiness,

*In the pure realm of the great sacred site, the Five-Peaked Mountain,  
The blessings of Manjushri's wisdom ripened in your mind—  
Jigme Phuntsok, at your feet I pray!  
Inspire me with your blessings: transmit the realization of  
the wisdom-mind lineage!*

By calling out the name of His Holiness and praying to him, we can be inspired by his supreme blessing. This name is certainly different from any random worldly name. Because of this extraordinary feature, in the Tibetan tradition, after a guru has passed into nirvana, it is difficult and also inappropriate for disciples to call out his name directly during conversations. In the occasion where disciples have to speak out the name of their passed guru, they will add an honorific before the guru's name. For example, when mentioning our guru, we may say "The One Whose Name Is Unspeakable but Should Nonetheless Be Spoken under This Special Occasion, H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche."

Of course, for those who have no faith, it would be difficult for them to believe the extraordinariness of these noble names. Even though we have talked about the amazing qualities of many buddha names in this chapter, they would not be impressed. When speaking of the names of some great masters, they would not be inspired either. Just as *The Buddha Speaks of the Mahayana Ten Dharmas Sutra* says,

*A man who has no faith  
Will not give birth to pure virtues,  
Just like scorched seeds  
Do not take root and germinate.*

People who do not have faith cannot engage in virtues or generate merit, just like a fully burnt seed cannot germinate and grow into a green plant.

This reminds me of the poor, withered plants and flowers that we bought for landscaping at Larung Gar. Recently, our academy has invested a lot of money in landscaping. We have bought a considerable number of flowers and plants. But it would appear that our groundskeeping team has not managed the plantings appropriately. The flowers are left uncared for on the roadside without being watered. As I went to the Mandala earlier today, I saw that the flowers were dried and almost withered, no longer green and fresh. A team should have been assigned for the care of the flowers. It is unclear to me why the beautiful flowers were left unattended. What was the team doing? This irresponsible act is no different from the “scorched seeds” that “do not take root and germinate”.

Whatever we do, we should do it well from start to finish. That is just as true in the volunteer service we provide. Some people are

notably enthusiastic when they first start volunteering but they do not finish well. Detail is the key to success. If long-term motivation and attention to detail are lacking, a whirl of whim is meaningless as it does not lead to a sustainable effort.

## Jewel Sign Tathagata

**“Moreover, in the past there arose in the world a Buddha named Jewel Sign Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name and give rise to a reverent mind, these people will attain arhatship before long.**



In the *Sutra of the Buddha’s Words of Teaching*, a buddha named Jewel Sign is also mentioned. I am not certain that he is the same

as the one mentioned here in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. According to that sutra, Buddha Shakyamuni once was expounding the merit of virtuous teachers in the celestial realm. The audience was deeply touched and realized that if they had not been cared for by virtuous teachers in their past lives, they would not have encountered the Buddha and heard the profound Dharma in this life. However, knowing that they had not been able to repay their teachers' great kindness, they began to cry. The Buddha then sighed with great compassion toward them, shaking the whole world and all the buddha fields in the process.

Across billions of worlds to the east of the saha world, there is a world called Jeweled Land where Buddha Jewel Sign resides. Besides the Buddha, there is a bodhisattva called Adornment of Pervasive Radiance. At that time, this bodhisattva asked Buddha Jewel Sign what made the world shake. Buddha Jewel Sign said that it was because Buddha Shakyamuni in the saha world was explaining the kindness of virtuous teachers. Then Bodhisattva Adornment of Pervasive Radiance expressed his wish to listen to the teachings in person in front of Buddha Shakyamuni. With the encouragement of Buddha Jewel Sign as well as his miraculous power, the bodhisattva left his world and in a moment arrived at the place of Buddha Shakyamuni. Upon the request of the bodhisattva,



Buddha Shakyamuni give him the teaching on how to follow and attend to virtuous teachers.

## **Kasaya Banner Tathagata**

**“Moreover, in the past, measureless asamkhyeya kalpas ago, there arose in the world a Buddha named Kasaya Banner Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name, they will transcend a hundred great kalpas of torments of samsara.**

This buddha’s name appears many times in the *Liturgy of Compassionate Samadhi Water Repentance*, a liturgy for confession in Han Buddhism composed by the Imperial Master Wuda. The master compiled this liturgy for his own daily repentance, which then became a popular practice of confession. Here is the story of the origin of this liturgy:

In a previous life during the Western Han Dynasty, Master Wuda was a minister called Yuan Ang. In that life, he successfully persuaded the emperor to execute another minister named Zhao Cuo by cutting him in half at the waist. For ten lives since then, the spirit of the man Zhao Cuo had been seeking revenge on Yuan Ang but found no opportunity, because Yuan Ang had always been an excellent monk who preserved pure precepts. In this life, when

Wuda became the imperial master and gave rise to one arrogant thought, the spirit exploited the chance and appeared at his knee as a human-faced sore, which had eyebrows, eyes, a mouth, and teeth. It even demanded to be fed with drink and food.

Master Wuda sought help from many well-known doctors, but none could treat him successfully. Then the master thought about the words of a monk whom he used to help. In the past, Master Wuda encountered a monk who suffered from illness, he then took care of the monk until he recovered. Out of gratitude, the monk told him that if he ever met any problem, he could come to Jiulong Mountain to find him for help. Then Master Wuda came to Jiulong Mountain and found the monk, who then instructed him to wash the sore at the spring there. As Master Wuda was about to rinse the sore, it started to speak and told the master his grievance and their story in a previous life. Then, by the power of the Dharma water of samadhi, the spirit let go of his grudge and the master recovered. Thereafter, Master Wuda compiled the *Liturgy of Compassionate Samadhi Water Repentance* and chanted it every day to confess his wrongdoings. The special monk, by the way, was the manifestation of one of the Sixteen Great Arhats, the noble elder Kanakavatsa.

In Master Wuda's liturgy for repentance, we can see many times of "Namo Buddha Kasaya Banner". This buddha is indeed powerful

for purifying negative karma, and just hearing his name will eradicate the torments of samsara in a hundred great kalpas.

## Great Penetration Mountain King Tathagata

**“Moreover, in the past there arose in the world a Buddha named Great Penetration Mountain King Tathagata. If there are men and women who hear this Buddha’s name, these people will meet as many Buddhas as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River, who will extensively expound the Dharma for them, and they will certainly attain bodhi.**



The sutra then describes a buddha named Great Penetration Mountain King Tathagata. If men or women hear this buddha’s name,

they will encounter as many buddhas as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River, all of whom will explain the Dharma to them in detail and help them realize ultimate enlightenment.

We have now reviewed the names of the ten Tathagatas. Considering the remarkable blessing of these buddha names, I hope you will write them down and put them in your daily chant book. Add “Namo” before each name and chant them frequently. Some love the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* and keep reciting it on a daily basis, which is very good. But for many, they may not have time to recite this entire sutra every day, not even just this chapter. If that is the case, you can recite the names of these buddhas instead, which will not take too much time but will bring immense benefits.

## **Names of More Buddhas**

**“Moreover, in the past, there was Pure Moon Buddha, Mountain King Buddha, Wisdom Excellence Buddha, Pure Name King Buddha, Wisdom Accomplished Buddha, Unsurpassed Buddha, Wonderful Sound Buddha, Full Moon Buddha, and Moon-Countenance Buddha—there were inexpressibly [many] Buddhas such as these.**



Here, Ksitigarbha listed more buddhas. Even though Ksitigarbha didn't specify their meritorious qualities, be aware that if we recite any of these names and supplicate to them, the merit will be inconceivable.

## BENEFIT OF RECITING BUDDHA NAMES

**“World-Honored One, all living beings in the present and future—be they devas or humans, men or women—as long as they remember a Buddha’s name, they will attain measureless virtues. How much more so when they remember many [Buddhas’] names! These beings will gain great benefits at the time of birth and the time of death, and they will never fall into the lower realms.**

After I have translated *A Garland of Jewels: Names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas*, my hope is that more and more people will recite the names of those noble figures frequently. For a time, practitioners here in Larung Gar chanted that text on a regular basis and they persisted for quite a while. I believe many of them are still following this practice because I know some practitioners have included the names of many buddhas and bodhisattvas in their

daily chanting and have been carrying on the recitation every day without interruption.

**“If a person is on the verge of death and his family members, even just one of them, recite a Buddha’s name clearly for the sick one’s sake, with the exception of the five great violations that lead to incessant torments, the ripened effects of the dying person’s other karma will be dissolved. The five great violations that lead to incessant torments are so extremely grave that the offender would pass through millions of kalpas without release. [...]**



When someone is near death, if his family members, even if it is just one person, chant just the name of one buddha, like “Namo Amitabha”, “Namo Buddha Shakyamuni”, “Namo Tathagata Ratnasikhin”, then except for the five crimes with immediate retribution, all other karmic retributions of this dying person will dissolve. Because these five crimes are extremely grave, those who commit them will stay in the hell and other lower realms for millions of eons without release. This is certainly a terrifying consequence.

Even though the five great crimes are severe, it is not unresolvable. As it is said in *The King of Aspiration Prayers*,

*All negative acts—even the five of immediate retribution—  
Whatever they have committed in the grip of ignorance,  
Will soon be completely purified,  
If they recite this Aspiration to Good Actions.*

We now recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers* as our daily practice so that even if we had committed one or more of the five crimes of immediate retribution as a result of our ignorance, thanks to the power of this recitation, this grave negative karma can promptly melt away.

The merit of *The King of Aspiration Prayers* is indeed unbelievable. I remember when His Holiness was alive, quite a few times after



his teaching, Khenpo Gardo asked His Holiness, “Is *The King of Aspiration Prayers* that auspicious and beneficial? Will it be that simple that just through reciting it, even the five grave crimes would be purified?” His Holiness replied, “Yes, this stanza here does not mention any other requirement like visualizations. According to it, you simply need to recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers* and by virtue of its recitation, these negativities can be completely purified. Does this mean that people would be free to commit misdeeds any time they want? Not really. Wise people are remorseful of their wrongdoings and they will resolve not to repeat their negative actions. That is, they possess the four powers of purifying their negativities.”

While chanting *The King of Aspiration Prayers* or reciting certain mantras can dissolve the negativities of the five grave crimes, it is essential to also apply the four powers of purification, otherwise such grave negative karma can still be a big obstacle for taking rebirth in Sukhavati. In addition to the five grave crimes, there could also be numerous negative deeds we have committed in this life or past lives that would violate the Mahayana vows or the Vajrayana vows. In this very short life, since we are fortunate enough to have encountered so many powerful methods of purification, we should exert ourselves in these practices in order to attain a pure life and a

pure rebirth. Diligent practice is indispensable to make this human existence meaningful and to stop the wheel of samsara.

**“[...] Nevertheless, by virtue of other people reciting and meditating on the names of Buddhas for his sake when he is on the verge of death, [even the torments from] such offenses can be gradually dissolved, too. How much more so when living beings themselves recite and meditate on [the names of Buddhas]! They will gain measureless merit and dissolve measureless [torments of] offenses.”**

Even if the dying person has committed the five grave crimes, if one recites buddha names to him, be it Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Shakyamuni, or others, by the power of that recitation, his karmic retribution, however grave they may be, can be gradually dissolved. If this even works indirectly, imagine how much more meritorious it would be if people actually recite the buddha names themselves, and how much more effective it would be for their negative karma to be broadly eliminated.

Therefore, we should aspire to always chant *The King of Aspiration Prayers* and recite the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas to help eliminate all the negative karma stored in our alaya consciousness, and to be reborn in the blissful land of Sukhavati.

We have now completed the ninth chapter. My hope is that we can finish the teaching of the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* this year as well. It is a great accomplishment for all of you to be able to study this entire sutra in depth. Likewise, I feel satisfied and relieved that I was able to give you this teaching. I hope that whenever you attend a Mahayana teaching such as this that you will be attentive and embrace it with faith, making it meaningful for both the teacher and the audience.



## Chapter Ten

*Comparing the Conditions and Virtues of Giving*

This chapter mainly compares the merit of giving under different circumstances. Even though the amounts of the alms may be the same, the merit thus generated may vary greatly due to the recipients' and the donors' motivations. With the same donation but different motivations, some will gain great merit and some will not. This is why in this chapter the Buddha talks about the merit of giving under different conditions.

—Khenpo Sodargye

# Lecture Twenty

August 24th, 2020

## EFFICACY STORY: EXTEND LIFESPAN BY THE POWER OF Ksitigarbha

We continue with the teaching on the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*. As usual, I will first share with you an efficacy story of Ksitigarbha statue. In the Song Dynasty there was a person named Chen Jian in the state of Tai. He was very filial and in order to take good care of his parents, he built a special house for them and also had two statues of Ksitigarbha and Avalokiteshvara made on their behalf. Not long after, Chen grew ill and died suddenly. Overwhelmed with grief, his parents cried over his death. About four hours later, however, he was resurrected. He prostrated himself before his parents and told them about his experience after death.

In the bardo, Chen was sad that he had not fulfilled his filial duty to his parents. Then all of a sudden, he arrived at King Yama's place. To his surprise, the two statues he made for his parents stood in the hall and King Yama was paying respect to them. Seeing Chen coming, King Yama held Chen's hand, and the two statues also

supported him from each side and walked Chen to the middle of the hall.

An elegant voice then came from the statues, saying to King Yama that Chen's filial duty to his parents had not yet finished so he should be sent back to the human world to continue his duty. "But Chen's lifespan has been exhausted," King Yama replied. The statues then said, "One's life expectancy is unfixed and can be changed by other conditions. Since Chen accumulated great merit, why should not his lifespan be prolonged?"

Hearing this, King Yama consulted a book and found the following words: For anyone who fulfills his filial piety to his parents by making Buddhist images or statues, his lifespan can be extended by forty years—the first 20 years would be spent being filial to his parents, and for the second 20 years he would be cared for by his filial child. At this time, a Yama guard dressed in green told King Yama, "Chen's son would only live for ten years. Who will take care of Chen?" King Yama answered, "The Dharma King Ksitigarbha's words are decisive. We shall extend his son's lifespan also."

By then Chen was resurrected. That experience aroused his great faith in Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. He told many people about his experience and those who heard it all felt that his experience was extraordinary.



As we see from the story, although Chen built the statues of Ksitigarbha and Avalokiteshvara for his parents, Chen himself derived immense benefit from his own action. Most of the stories I have shared with you are set down in the *Records of Efficacy of Ksitigarbha Image* which is collected in the Successive Tripitaka. Likely as a result of the personal style of the compiler, the monk Chang Jin, the storylines of many stories he collected appeared similar. We may try to find other efficacy stories with different storylines in the future.

Every one of these stories is truly inspiring. After learning about these great benefits of engaging in the Ksitigarbha practice, we should try our very best to make Ksitigarbha statues, read the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, listen to the teaching on the *Ksitigarbha Sutra*, and also rejoice in others' engagement in all these practices while we are still alive in this world. The merit generated from any of these actions is inconceivable.

As we progress in this study, I have found the audience to have shown greater interest in the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* than I had expected. Since it is already August, I will try to finish this teaching before the end of September. To receive the teaching of an entire sutra is not easy as you would need to spend much time and energy. Likewise, to give a teaching in its entirety is also a significant undertaking. I

look forward to the completion of this sutra and I hope nothing unexpected would interrupt our teaching.

Today we will start with the tenth chapter, *Comparing the Conditions and Virtues of Giving*. This chapter mainly compares the merit of giving under different circumstances. Even though the amounts of the alms may be the same, the merit thus generated may vary greatly due to the recipients' and the donors' motivations. With the same donation but different motivations, some will gain great merit and some will not. This is why in this chapter the Buddha talks about the merit of giving under different conditions.

# THE PROPER ATTITUDE WHILE GIVING

## Chapter Ten

### Comparing the Conditions and Virtues of Giving

At that time, through [the power of] the Buddha's awesome spiritual penetration, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva-Mahasattva rose from his seat, knelt on his knees, joined his palms, and said to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, I observe living beings in the karmic paths and compare their acts of giving: some [acts] are small and some are great. Some beings then receive merit for one life, some receive merit for ten lives, and some receive great merit and benefit for hundreds of lives, for thousands of lives. Why is this? O World-Honored One, please explain this for me."

At that time, the Buddha told Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, "Now, in this assembly in the Trayastrimsa Heaven, I will speak on the

giving done by beings of Jambudvīpa and compare the virtues therein. You should listen attentively. I will explain for you.”

Kṣitigarbha said to the Buddha, “I have doubts about this matter, and I joyfully wish to listen.”



Through the blessing of the Buddha’s miraculous power, Kṣitigarbha spoke about his doubts. Based on his observation, when different beings practice generosity, the merit accrued from their acts varies greatly. Some simply receive a little return while others receive a bountiful return. Some receive blessings in one life, some in ten lives, and some in one hundred or even one thousand lives.

Ksitigarbha wondered what caused such big differences and asked the Buddha to explain this to the audience.

Let us imagine the spectacular scene and the big audience in the Trayastrimsa Heaven that included numerous ghost kings and their retinues, gods, and non-humans. Among such a grand assembly, the Buddha decided to speak about the acts of generosity performed by beings of Jambudvipa and compare their merit. He asked the assembly to listen carefully. Ksitigarbha expressed great interest in this teaching and joyfully asked the Buddha to talk about it.

As we see, even a bodhisattva as great as Ksitigarbha still relies on the blessing of the Buddha's mighty power to ask or answer questions. Great bodhisattvas attribute everything they accomplish and every quality they possess to the blessing of the Buddha's miraculous power. Ordinary practitioners should be even more so. Whatever ability or spiritual realization we have gained on the Dharma path is linked to the benevolence of our gurus as well as all our great lineage masters. However, unfortunately, some Buddhists today fail to acknowledge this crucial point. When they gain even a tiny bit of ability or reputation, they forget the kindness of their teachers. This is indeed an ungrateful attitude. As Buddhists, we should always have a sincere feeling of gratitude toward our benevolent teachers.

Here, the Buddha's teaching is mainly focused on the beings of Jambudvīpa. This is because Jambudvīpa confers a particular power on the effects of action. It is a place where the force of karma is more powerful and its effects are experienced more strongly. Beings in the other three continents, such as Uttarakuru, experience the results of past actions for the most part rather than creating new karma. The Buddha's commentary was directed mainly to the practice of generosity performed by beings of Jambudvīpa and a comparison of the merit therein.

People do attain different amounts of merit from their acts of generosity. Say ten people go to a monastery and each offers 100 RMB to the sangha or to a buddha statue. Because their motivations and purposes for making this donation may vary, some may gain merit for one life, some for ten lives, and some for one hundred, one thousand, or even more lives. This shows the importance of motivation and aspiration when performing virtues.

When the Buddha was about to address this issue, Kṣitigarbha expressed a strong interest in hearing it. Similarly, when we listen to Dharma teachings, it is crucial that we arouse interest and joy in ourselves. Every time we are going to listen to a Dharma teaching, whether in the shrine hall, on the radio, or through the Internet, we need to develop a sense of joy, "I am about to listen to Mahayana teachings. This is such a rare and precious opportunity

that I am so happy!" It is like the extreme joy one has when being offered a dream job. Or according to many sutras, the joy is indescribable because the opportunity to listen to the profound Mahayana teachings is indeed hard to come by for hundreds of thousands of kalpas. As the Buddha often said, "Human existence is rare to obtain; the Dharma teaching is rare to hear." We should develop great joy and take delight in listening to the Dharma whenever we have such an opportunity.

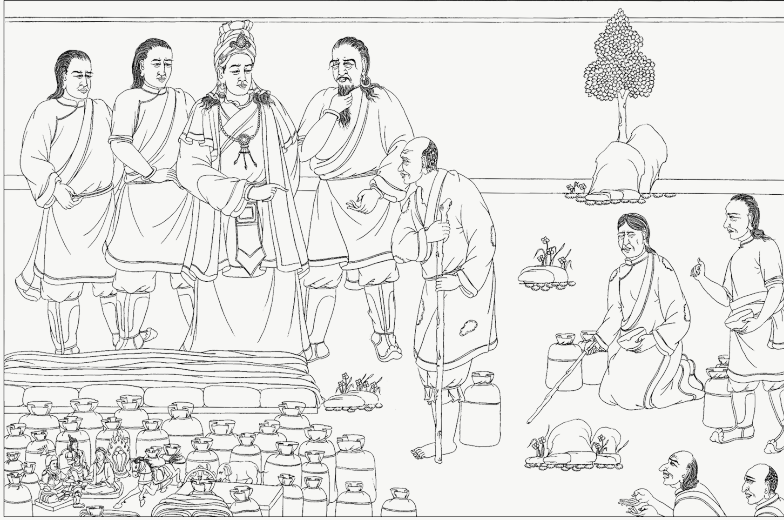
This joyful attitude needs to be present no matter from whom we receive the Dharma teaching. Some of our Dharma friends may complain, "Need to attend the teaching again in the early morning! I am so tired of it. Not to mention the tutorial session after that! I am too sleepy. I should better sleep a bit longer. I will just tell my teacher I am off sick today." In this case, listening to the Dharma has become a burden. We have to avoid this type of negative attitude. We should fully recognize its preciousness and joyfully receive the Dharma teaching like drinking delicious ambrosia. Since what the Buddha had taught was completely recorded in sutras, if we have the same joyfulness and eagerness in listening to the Dharma as Ksitigarbha had, we will for sure gain the benefit that is no different from personally listening to the teaching before the Buddha himself.

## THE CONDITIONS AND VIRTUES OF GIVING TO THE POOR

The Buddha told Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, “In Jambudvīpa there are kings, high ministers, ranking officials, great elders, great Ksatriyas, great Brahmans, and others who encounter those who are the lowest and poorest and those who are hunchbacked, crippled, mute, deaf, mentally deficient, blind—people who are handicapped in various ways such as these. At the time these great kings and others wish to give alms, if they are able to do so with great kindness and compassion, a humble mind, and a smile, giving out gifts to all these people personally or through their representatives and comforting them with gentle words, the merit and benefit that these kings and others will obtain will be comparable to the benefit derived from the virtue of giving to as many Buddhas as there are grains of sand in a hundred Ganges Rivers. Why is this? These kings and others will reap such results, receiving merit and benefit, because they give rise to a mind of great kindness toward the poorest, lowest people



**and those who are handicapped. For hundreds of thousands of lives they will always have an abundance of the seven jewels, not to mention food, clothing, and the necessities of life!**



The Buddha started by analyzing the many acts of generosity performed by a group of distinguished people with high social status who possess wealth, fame, or successful careers, such as kings, ministers, officials, noble elders, the ruling class Ksatriyas, and brahmans. Not only people with high social status but also those who love to practice generosity, regardless of whether they are wealthy or not, are included here. These people will be frequently mentioned in the following texts, so we need to keep in mind who they are.

When these people from kings to brahmans encounter the lowest and poorest ones or those with impaired sense faculties such as the disabled, the mute and deaf, the mentally deficient, and the blind, they generate sincere loving-kindness and compassion toward them and give alms to them with a humble mind and a smile, either personally or through others, speaking to and comforting them with kind, gentle, pleasant, and mild words and without any harsh attitude or behavior in the process. If they give alms in such a way, the merit that accrues from their acts is tantamount to that of making offerings to as many buddhas as the number of the grains of sand in one hundred Ganges Rivers. Why? It is because they have generated sincere compassion and bodhicitta for those who really need help. With this merit, for hundreds of thousands of lives, they will be endowed with the wealth of the seven treasures, not to mention food, clothing, and the necessities of life.

A humble mind and a sincere smile are always needed to express one's kindness and compassion. When helping others, one's words should be soft and mild, comforting and loving, sweet and heart-touching. Some privileged people may give alms to the poor in an arrogant and condescending manner. You cannot even find a trace of joy in their faces but only sullen looks. Their words may also be disrespectful. This is a very inappropriate attitude.

In the Wisdom and Compassion Foundation (a charitable organization under the supervision of Khenpo Sodargye), one of the projects is to sponsor children from poor families who cannot afford school. When visiting those families, some of the staff may speak to them with a tone of contempt. This also sometimes happens with some of the staff at my primary school when they admit new students. It is best to accept as many children as we can, but if we have to reject a child, we need to inform him or her in a respectful manner. I tell my staff that by no means should we be insulting or sarcastic.

People tend to feel self-important and behave arrogantly when they are endowed with certain worldly merits and power. This is inappropriate and shows a lack of wisdom. Although we may be privileged in many aspects in this lifetime, there is no guarantee that we can carry them to our next life. Therefore, a humble and kind attitude is needed when interacting with anyone. Especially when we participate in charitable activities, we will likely meet people who are in need. Their emotions may already be very fragile and sensitive because they are asking for help from others and they are not sure how others would respond. Under such difficult circumstances, our expressions and behavior, either kind or uncaring, could have a tremendous impact on them and would leave a material impression on them. With this understanding, we

should show compassion and kindness whenever we are helping others.

If one follows the way to perform generosity described here, it would align one's body, speech, and mind with the Dharma. One should be in a humble gesture and with a kind smile, refrain from harsh and insulting words, and carry love and compassion in one's mind. We should all keep this in mind when we give alms. If we are able to be charitable in this fashion, the sutra says that the merit accrued from giving alms to the poor and disabled is tantamount to that of making offering to numerous buddhas.

As for how such an inconceivably great merit can be generated from giving alms to the poor, it is because of bodhicitta, a pure altruistic motivation of benefiting all beings equally. The text indicates that people of such kind character want to help anyone in need equally and without personal discrimination. This is a unique quality of bodhicitta. Bodhisattvas extend their compassion unbiasedly to all living beings and treat them equally. They would bring benefit to every being with their best effort. It is quite wrong if a person only venerates buddhas but disrespects ordinary beings, as stated in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

*What kind of practice is it then,  
That honors only buddhas but not beings?*

Also, if one practices generosity out of selfish motivation, the merit can never be great. Only a generous act performed with a sincere altruistic intention is able to generate immeasurable merit. The *Treatise on a Great Man* says,

*Giving alms to one person with compassion,*

*The merit accrued is as vast as the earth.*

*Giving alms to all beings with a selfish motivation,*

*The merit accrued is as small as a mustard seed.*

One can clearly see the immense difference between a mustard seed and the earth. In the same way, there is a clear distinction between the merit of practicing generosity with an altruistic intention and that with a selfish motivation.

## **Compare the Merit of Giving Practiced by Shariputra and the Buddha**

In the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, it says that the generosity performed by ordinary beings is often transactional, i.e., they practice generosity for a return, whereas great bodhisattvas practice generosity unconditionally and they are willing to give everything they have, including their lives and limbs to all beings, and they even donate all merit generated from their giving to all beings. Such is the distinct difference between a bodhisattva's

generosity and that of an ordinary being. Even if their alms are identical, the merit accrued will be greatly different because of the different motivations. The treatise also says,

Although the alms being given are the same, the amounts of merit accrued vary depending on whether one's motivation is super or less. Once Shariputra offered a bowl of food to the Buddha. The Buddha immediately passed the food to a dog, and then asked Shariputra, "Which offering accrues greater merit? Is it your offering food to me or my giving food to the dog?" Shariputra replied, "As I understand the Dharma, it must be the Buddha's giving to the dog that accrues greater merit." Shariputra is foremost in wisdom among human disciples and the Buddha is the most supreme object for growing one's merit, however, Shariputra's offering to the Buddha accrued not as great merit as the Buddha's act of giving food to a dog, a much inferior recipient. From this, we learn that great merit is generated from the mind, not from the target. Shariputra's motivation was infinitely inferior to the Buddha's.

If we have to choose to whom we make offerings, the Buddha or a dog, most would certainly select the Buddha over a dog. However, what matters most while making an offering or practicing generosity is the mind instead of the recipient. Even if it was to the

Buddha who is the most supreme recipient of all that Shariputra had offered food, his act of offering generated less merit than the Buddha's generosity to a dog. The reason is that the Buddha's mind was vast and his compassion was boundless, and comparatively, as a shravaka, Shariputra was not completely free of selfishness as he offered food to the Buddha.

In Buddhism, recipients can be classified into different fields of offering. For example, there are the field of kindness which includes individuals such as one's parents, the field of compassion which includes beggars and the disabled, and the field of qualities which includes individuals such as realized bodhisattvas and buddhas. However, if one practices generosity with a vast and pure intention, even if the recipient is not a supreme field, one would still obtain immeasurable merit. In the *Account of the Previous Lives of Bodhisattvas*, it says,

*When practicing generosity,  
Even if the recipient is not a pure being,  
As long as one has a vast motivation,  
The result accrued is immeasurably great.*

When we practice generosity, even if the recipient is not pure or noble, as long as our motivation is pure and motivated by the mind of bodhicitta, we would gain immeasurable merit. Sometimes

people may worry, “I made offerings to a particular guru but later found out that he is a charlatan. What should I do?” Encountering an impure recipient could be the result of our lack of merit to meet a qualified and pure recipient. Nevertheless, as long as our motivation is pure and vast, such as wishing to propagate the Dharma and benefit all sentient beings, even if the recipient himself is not pure, our act of generosity would still generate great merit. This is because our motivation is the key.



## HOW SHOULD THE PRIVILEGED MAKE OFFERINGS?



**“Furthermore, Ksitigarbha, in the future if there are kings, Brah-  
mans, and others who encounter Buddha stupas, monasteries, or  
images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, sravakas, or pratyekabuddhas,  
and if they then personally prepare and make offerings and give  
gifts, these kings and others will be Sakras for three kalpas and**

experience excellent, wonderful happiness. If they are able to dedicate the merit and benefit of that giving to the Dharma Realm, these great kings and others will be great Brahma kings for ten kalpas.



“Furthermore, Ksitigarbha, in the future if there are kings, Brahmans, and others who encounter ancient Buddha-stupas, temples, sutras, or images that are damaged or dilapidated, and if they are able to generate the resolve to restore them—these kings and others then do so themselves, or they encourage others, as many as hundreds of thousands of people, to also give and form [wholesome] conditions—these kings and others will always be wheel-turning kings for hundreds of thousands of

**lives, and those who practice giving along with them will always be kings of smaller countries for hundreds of thousands of lives. Moreover, in front of the stupas or temples, if they can give rise to the mind of [merit]-dedication, then such kings, others, and their helpers will all attain Buddhahood, for such results are measureless and boundless.**

Anyone from kings to brahmans, if they ever encounter buddha stupas, monasteries, and images of buddhas, bodhisattvas, shravakas, and pratyekabuddhas and they prepare and make offerings to them personally, these people will take rebirth as Sakras and enjoy the supreme joy for three kalpas. If these individuals dedicate the root of virtue to the Dharma Realm, they would become Brahma kings, the most meritorious ones in the secular world, for ten kalpas. Here, making dedication to the Dharma Realm is a special expression often used in Han Buddhism which simply means dedicating the merit for the supreme awakening of all sentient beings, wishing them to attain the ultimate fruition of Dharmakaya.

Further, if they encounter stupas of buddhas who had entered parinirvana, such as Buddha Kashyapa and Buddha Shakyamuni, monasteries, sutras, or statues that sustain damage, and they resolve to repair them either personally or encourage others to participate in this virtuous activity, by this root of virtue, they will continuously take rebirth as universal monarchs for hundreds of

thousands of lifetimes. All others who participate in this virtuous act will continuously take rebirth as kings of smaller countries for hundreds of thousands of lifetimes. If they dedicate this root of virtue with the supreme mind of bodhicitta, they will all attain buddhahood. Such result is indeed immeasurable and infinite.

We see that people's attitudes toward generosity could vary greatly, something that may have nothing to do with their wealth but is very much influenced by their habitual tendencies. There are those who are not wealthy but who love to give alms. Even if they only have 100 RMB, they will donate half or even all of it to those in need. In contrast, some who are quite blessed in terms of material wealth are not at all charitable and would regard this as none of their business. There are also those who are particularly enthusiastic about collecting donations for certain causes such as restoring old temples and they constantly solicit donations from others. However, they would refuse to donate even a penny themselves. It would seem that the only part they contribute to the causes is to share the news with others. This is certainly not a proper practice of generosity.

When we make donations, we should avoid having a miserly and regretful attitude. For instance, if you had given more than you wanted and you now regret having given the amount, you may not be able to receive the merit because it is now ruined by your

regret. Some people may donate all they have when they go to a monastery such that they would not even have enough money to go home, making it necessary for them to ask others for help. If nobody answers their request, they might then turn to the buddha or bodhisattva statues to see if their offering would be returned, only to find out that the statues remain in silent meditation and have no response to their request. This is completely avoidable.

When it comes to repairing damaged Buddhist objects, back at the time when I was a teenager, ruined monasteries, torn scriptures, broken buddha statues, destroyed stupas, and fragmented Mani stone piles were everywhere in the Tibetan regions. Fortunately, most of the ruined monasteries have been restored. We also seldom find broken stupas or statues, except for wall paintings in certain monasteries that have been eroded by rain or certain statues that are under maintenance. Most Buddhist objects are now in good conditions. However, in a few regions and countries, Buddhist stupas and statues are being demolished for religious and political reasons and there is no opportunity to repair them. If we encounter structures such as old temples and statues that are being damaged, we should try to repair them.

The merit generated by virtuous deeds related to Buddhist objects such as stupas and statues is immeasurable and infinite. In the sutra *Avadanasataka*, there was a story of a bhiksu named Golden Color.

He got this name because he had an attractive golden complexion. The Buddha told of a man in the time of Vipasyin Buddha who passed by a stupa and noticed it had sustained minor damage. He repaired the damage, gilded it, and then made a wish to break free from samsara. By this virtue, he never took rebirth in a lower realm for as long as ninety-one kalpas, and wherever he was reborn, either as a human being or a celestial being, he always had a golden complexion. In the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, he became a bhiksu named Golden Color and achieved enlightenment.

Other similar stories are also found in this sutra. In the time of Vipasyin Buddha, there was a child who once visited a relic stupa of Vipasyin Buddha. During his visit, he saw some minor damages on it, so he kindly called upon some others to repair the stupa together. After repairing, he also made the wish to break free from samsara. With this merit, for ninety-one kalpas, he was exempted from falling into a lower realm and wherever he was born, he was well revered by anyone who saw him, humans and gods alike. In the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, he became a bhiksu named Revered-By-All and achieved enlightenment. As we can see, even a small merit accumulated from the repair of Buddhist stupas or statues brings boundless rewards in numerous future lifetimes.

Just as the merit accumulated from these deeds is boundless, the fault for destroying Buddhist stupas or statues is also inconceivably

grave. As we live in a relatively peaceful age, it is less likely that we could commit such grave faults. However, those who are a bit older than us in the last generation had gone through a turbulent period in the last century when they were forced to commit many negative deeds related to the Three Jewels. Had we lived in that chaotic circumstance, we might also have unintentionally or been forced to create severely negative karma that is difficult to purify.

Primarily as a result of our ignorance, some of us may have slandered the Buddha, denigrated the Dharma, maligned the Sangha, and may even have destroyed Buddhist scriptures and stupas before we started to follow Buddhism. Many of us may also have accumulated grave negative karma since beginningless time even though we have no memory of it. For these reasons, we should constantly try to purify our negative karma by applying its antidotes, such as reciting the Vajrasattva mantra, generating the aspiration of bodhicitta, or achieving the realization of emptiness. We should try our best to repent all our negative karma before our death so that we will not encounter any big obstacle at the moment of death that will otherwise prevent us from taking rebirth in the pure lands or attaining liberation.

## THE VIRTUE OF HELPING THOSE IN NEED

**“Furthermore, Ksitigarbha, in the future if there are kings, Brahmans, and others who see the old, the sick, or women in childbirth and if in a thought-moment, they have the mind of great kindness and provide them with medicine, food, drink, and bedding to make them peaceful and comfortable, the merit and benefit [of their giving] will be very inconceivable. For a hundred kalpas they will always be lords of the pure-abode heavens, for two hundred kalpas they will always be lords of the six heavens of the desire realm, and they will ultimately become Buddhas. They will never fall into the lower realms, and for hundreds of thousands of lives they will not hear the sounds of suffering.**

**“Furthermore, Ksitigarbha, in the future if there are kings, Brahmans, and others who are able to give in such ways, they will gain measureless merit. Moreover, if they are able to dedicate [the merit of their giving]—be it a lot or a little—[to the Dharma**



Realm], they will ultimately become Buddhas, not to mention reaping the ripened effects to be Sakras, Brahmas, and wheel-turning kings. Therefore, Ksitigarbha, encourage all living beings to learn [to give] thus.



For those who encounter anyone in need from illness, age, or childbirth, if they instantly generate compassion and provide these people with medicines, food, drink, bedding, and other necessities to help them gain peace and comfort, they will gain inconceivable rewards and merit. For one hundred kalpas they will always be lords of the Five Pure Heavens of the form realm; for two hundred kalpas they will be lords in the Six Heavens of the desire realm, and they will eventually attain buddhahood. They will never fall into

the lower realms, and they will not hear the sounds of suffering for hundreds of thousands of lives. Helping those in need is really important. When the opportunity presents itself, we should try our best to offer them help. Even if their suffering were alleviated by just a little, we will receive inconceivable merit by this virtue.

Further, for anyone who practices generosity and dedicates his virtue with the mind of bodhicitta, no matter how big or small the virtue may appear, he would be on the right path to attain buddhahood, not to mention to reap the rewards of becoming Indras, Brahmas, and universal monarchs. The Buddha then exhorted Ksitigarbha to encourage all sentient beings to learn to practice generosity with an altruistic intention and the aspiration of bodhicitta. Such an attitude is important to remember and keep in mind.

In the Chinese Tripitaka, there is a very short sutra called *The Buddha Speaks of Jyotishka Sutra*. It was translated into Chinese from Sanskrit by Gunabhadra during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. I have not found a Tibetan translation of this sutra but Jyotishka was mentioned in several Tibetan sutras. In Theravada Buddhism, he was commonly known as Jotika, the Sanskrit name's transliteration in the Pali language. Jotika was a human being at the Buddha's time and was particularly blessed with almost

inexhaustible wealth. It was said in a number of other sources that he possessed almost the wealth of a god.

One time he was in the king's palace with all the other ministers of the court, and a piece of white cloth was blown toward them by the wind. The king asked his ministers if this was some kind of a sign. All the ministers said that it must have been a gift from the gods signifying that the kingdom would thrive. But Jotika didn't say anything. The king then asked him why he remained silent while everybody was so happy about such an auspicious sign. Jotika said, "I dare not deceive you, my king. Actually, this is just a towel used for wiping the nose in my house. It was hung beside the pool and now has been blown to the palace. That is why I remain silent."

Several days later, a nine-colored flower as big as a wheel was blown to the palace. The king summoned his ministers and asked what this meant. The ministers said that because the kingdom would thrive, the celestial gods had sent this gift for the celebration. This time, again, Jotika remained silent. When the king asked why, Jotika said that it was nothing but a withered flower from his backyard garden which was brought to the palace by the wind.

Hearing his statement, the king wanted to take his retinue of 200,000 persons to visit Jotika's house and asked Jotika to go home and make preparations for the visit. Jotika told the king that they

could go immediately with him and there was no need to prepare anything because everything such as bedding, food, and drink would spontaneously appear. When they arrived at his house, they entered through the south gate where there stood a handsome and lovely young boy. The king asked Jotika, "Is this your son?" Jotika answered, "I dare not deceive you, my king. He is the gatekeeper of my house." As they entered the inner door, there stood a beautiful young girl. When asked whether she was his wife, Jotika said that she was the door girl.

As they came to the main hall, the walls were made of silver and the ground was made of crystal, which made it like a pool of clear water and the king dared not go forward. Jotika just asked the king to follow him. When Jotika's wife came to greet the king, her eyes brimmed with tears. The king wondered why, and Jotika said that it was due to the smell of smoke from the king that caused tears to well up in her eyes. Unlike ordinary people's houses or the king's palace which needed to burn oil for lighting, Jotika's house used luminous jewel for lighting. That was why his wife could not bear the smell of the king.

In front of the main hall, there stood an extremely splendid twelve-storied mansion. The king toured Jotika's house for almost two months and all the while his ministers urged him to return to the palace to deal with the myriad of state affairs requiring his attention.

After returning to the palace, the king could not understand why his subordinate, Jotika, was so much richer than him in every way. Feeling intense resentment, he summoned his ministers and expressed his intention to mobilize the army to teach Jotika a lesson. Of course, this idea was supported by his ministers.

The king prepared 400,000 troops and sent them to Jotika's house. The troops encircled it completely. Seeing this, a servant from Jotika's house took a vajra and pointed it at them and immediately all the troops and their horses fell down and were unable to get up no matter how hard they tried. Jotika then came out and raised a miraculous wand which enabled them to stand up and return to the king's palace.

The king became even more curious as to why Jotika could be so blessed and surpassed him in every way. He asked Jotika to go with him to see the Buddha. After the king had told the Buddha about his doubt, the Buddha said that in one of his previous lives, Jotika was a leader of five hundred merchants. One day they were traveling on a mountain road and they encountered a sick practitioner deep in the mountain. Out of compassion, the merchant leader built a shelter for him and provided him with everything he needed such as bedding, clothing, food, and drink. Due to this virtue, his life had become extremely prosperous. The sick practitioner was now the Buddha himself.

There are many details of Jotika's story which I have skipped and I have just given you a brief account. In this story, we learn that Jotika provided food and provisions for a sick practitioner in his previous life, and as a result, he became so blessed that even the king was envious of him. That being the case, we should extend our sincere compassion to any sick or poor people we encounter and try our best to help them. When we see practitioners who suffer from illness and cannot afford medical expenses, or who lack basic sustenance, it is essential that we give them alms and support them.

However, it is not proper to expect to gain benefits in return for helping others, as if to make a trade. Even I have this kind of mindset sometimes. I used to sponsor a number of students to attend college. When they ignored me after they finished their studies, I would feel a little upset because they used to be very friendly with me but they would not even say hello to me after their graduation. What I should do is that when I decide to sponsor these students, I should do so unconditionally and without any expectation. Only this is a true practice of generosity.

It says in the *Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra* that "Bodhisattvas practice generosity for the benefit of all sentient beings, not for self-pleasure nor for gaining rewards in future lives. It is unlike trading in market." Bodhisattvas give alms not for their own happiness,

nor for gaining wealth and fame in future lifetimes, nor treat it like a transaction with the expectation that “I give alms to you today in the hope that you will repay me tomorrow or that I will gain much more in the future.” However, many people practice generosity with the intention of gaining benefit and happiness in their present or future lives. With a narrower and impure motivation, their karmic reward will be limited.

The Buddha also said in the *Ekottara Agama* and other discourses that there is no difference between giving alms to the sick and making offerings to the Buddha. The *Ekottara Agama* says,

*If one makes offerings to me  
As well as all buddhas in the past,  
The merit accrued from it  
Is not greater than that of visiting the sick.*

We may prefer to make offerings to great masters endowed with supreme qualities rather than to the poor and sick. But in fact, making offerings to those who have already possessed everything is more like icing on the cake, which is less necessary. What is truly needed and important is to give alms to the poor and ill. In this case, there is no difference between helping a sick person and making offerings to the Buddha. We need to understand this teaching now that it has been reiterated several times.

## THE VIRTUE OF MAKING OFFERINGS TO HOLY OBJECTS

**“Furthermore, Ksitigarbha, in the future if good men and good women plant in Buddhadharma a few roots of goodness, even as little as [a strand of] hair, [a grain of] sand, or [a speck of] dust, the merit and benefit that they will receive will be beyond compare.**

**“Furthermore, Ksitigarbha, in the future if there are good men and good women who encounter the images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, pratyekabuddhas, or wheel-turning kings, and give gifts and make offerings to them, they will gain measureless merit. They will always be reborn in the human and heaven realms and experience excellent, wonderful happiness. If they can dedicate [that merit] to the Dharma Realm, their merit and resulting benefit will be beyond compare.**





If there are virtuous men and virtuous women in the world to come who plant virtuous root in the Dharma that could be as tiny as a strand of hair, a grain of sand, or a speck of dust, the benefit derived from it would be beyond compare. When they encounter statues or thangkas of buddhas, bodhisattvas, pratyekabuddhas, or universal monarchs who are blessed with supreme worldly merits and they make offerings to them, they will gain immeasurable merit. They will forever be reborn in the human and heaven realms and enjoy supreme happiness. If they further dedicate the root of virtue with the mind of bodhicitta, the merit accrued would be beyond compare.

In most of the confession liturgies as well as sutras concerning the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas in Han Buddhism, shravakas are not very often found. In contrast, pratyekabuddhas are more often found. Personally, I think this may be due to the fact that pratyekabuddhas have stronger altruism than shravakas.

When we are motivated by bodhicitta, offering even one lamp to a buddha statue will bear inexpressibly great merit. The amount of merit one gains from practicing generosity is not measured by the size or the value of the gift but by one's motivation and aspiration. If a person donates 10,000 RMB with a selfish and showy mind, this act will not generate a great deal of merit. By contrast, if one even donates 1 RMB but with the aspiration of bodhicitta, the merit created will be inconceivable. A story from the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* tells of a poor woman who offered one butter lamp to the Buddha with the vast intention of eliminating the darkness of ignorance of all sentient beings. As a result, even the great arhat Maudgalyayana could not extinguish it with any of the miraculous power he applied. A virtuous act directed by bodhicitta will bear merit that is beyond compare.

The *Sutra on the Previous Stories of the One Thousand Buddhas* translated by Kumarajiva records the stories of the one thousand buddhas of the Fortunate Kalpa at their causal stage. In numerous kalpas past, there were one thousand young boys who saw a bhiksu

holding a buddha statue passing by. Seeing the dignified appearance of the buddha statue, they generated great faith and each offered the statue a lotus flower and paid respect at the buddha's feet. Because of this root of virtue, they encountered numerous buddhas in their future lives and became the one thousand buddhas of the Fortunate Kalpa. In the story of Prince Vessantara, it says that while he was a brahmin in the time of Buddha Dipamkara, he offered seven lotus flowers to Buddha Dipamkara and made great aspirations. Because of this act, the brahmin later became Prince Siddhartha, who attained full enlightenment in that very life and became Buddha Shakyamuni.

Such is the incredible working of karma and the principle of dependent arising. In this process, forming an aspiration is crucial. As we recite *The King of Aspiration Prayers* every day, even though we probably cannot visualize every aspiration clearly all the time, we should at least be making aspirations such as "I dedicate all my virtuous roots accumulated today to all infinite beings in the world and meanwhile, let me perfect the seven qualities of birth in a higher realm from life to life." Let us all try to make vast aspirations such as these and avoid any evil wish. This is of great importance.

**"Furthermore, Ksitigarbha, in the future if there are good men and good women who encounter the Mahayana sutras or just**

**hear a verse or a sentence and give rise to a sincere, reverent mind, sing praises, venerate, and make offerings, these people will reap great results which are measureless and boundless. If they can dedicate [that merit] to the Dharma Realm, their merit will be beyond compare.**

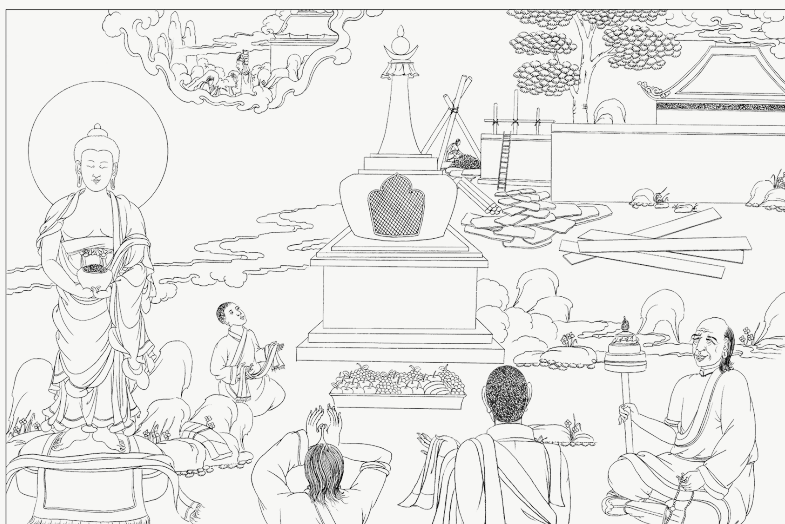
If a virtuous man or woman encounters a Mahayana scripture or hear one of the Mahayana stanzas such as “All phenomena are impermanent. They are subject to birth and death. When birth and death are ceased, this tranquility is called bliss”, or even just one line of a stanza such as “All phenomena are impermanent”, if they then generate sincere joy and reverence toward it, praising and making offerings to it, they will receive boundless and immeasurable rewards. If they further dedicate this root of virtue with bodhicitta, their merit will be even more incredible.

Over the past few years, we have learned together many important Mahayana scriptures such as the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, as well as the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* which we are currently studying. Mahayana sutras carry inconceivable blessings and merit. It is said that when Vasubandhu was reciting a prajnaparamita sutra, a dove was often present and heard his recitation with reverence. After the dove died, it took rebirth as a boy who later became one of the great disciples of Vasubandhu, the famous scholar Sthiramati. In the *Brief Records of the Efficacy*

of *Avatamsaka Sutra*, there is a story about a man who washed his hands after reading the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. It happened that several small insects were drowned in the water he used to wash his hands. Because of this karmic connection, those insects all took rebirth in heaven after their death.

Similarly, if there are animals such as insects or bugs around the venues of Dharma teachings or Dharma assemblies, they can also obtain great benefit. Non-believers who happen to be there will be benefited as well. Because of this, when I am invited to give teachings or preside over Dharma assemblies outside of the academy, I would always encourage the local people to bring their parents and children with them. It is true that with young children in the audience, there could be unanticipated noisy interruptions from their cries or movements. It is also true that they would not understand most of the teaching. Nevertheless, attending a Dharma lecture in their childhood will have a great impact on their whole lives. When they grow up, they may recall the occasion as well as the Dharma they heard. Such experience could bring about great transformation in them. Even if there is no obvious transformation, simply hearing the sound of the Dharma would be helpful to them because it will leave a virtuous imprint in their mindstreams.

Since Larung Gar is a Buddhist academy, it is unrealistic to include many children and elderly people in our classes. However, when lay practitioners outside the valley listen to the Dharma teaching through the Internet or other means, it would be meaningful if they can let their families hear the teaching. In spite of the fact that they are non-believers and may sometimes be annoyed by the sound of the lessons because they have no idea what the teaching is about, they will still benefit from it.



**“Furthermore, Ksitigarbha, in the future if there are good men and good women who encounter Buddha stupas, monasteries, or Mahayana sutras that are new, and they make offerings, gaze reverently, pay obeisance, sing praises, and join their palms in**

respect; and if they encounter old or damaged ones and they make repairs and restorations—they generate the resolve to do so themselves or they encourage many others to generate the resolve to do so with them—those who help will always be kings of smaller countries for thirty lives. The donors who lead the giving will always be wheel-turning kings and will teach and transform the kings of smaller countries by means of the good Dharma.

“Furthermore, Ksitigarbha, in the future if there are good men and good women who plant roots of goodness in Buddhadharma by giving, making offerings, repairing stupas or monasteries, rebinding sutras, or doing deeds as little as a strand of hair, a speck of dust, a grain of sand, or a drop of water—as long as they can dedicate [the merit of] such wholesome deeds to the Dharma Realm, the virtues of these people will lead them to experience superior, wonderful happiness for hundreds of thousands of lives. However, if they dedicate [the merit] only to their family or relatives or to their personal benefit, the result will be to experience happiness for three lives. To give one is to receive ten thousandfold in return. Thus, Ksitigarbha, such are the causes and conditions of giving.”



The Buddha said that going forward, if virtuous men and virtuous women encounter either new or old buddha stupas, Buddhist monasteries, and Mahayana sutras, those who make offerings and pay respect, sing praises, and join their palms in respect to the new ones will accumulate great merit. They will also receive great benefits if they aspire to repair the old or damaged ones either by themselves or they call upon others to do it together. In the latter case, all those who are called up to participate will take rebirth as kings of minor countries for thirty lives. Those virtuous men or women who lead the activity will forever take rebirth as universal monarchs and will further teach and transform the kings



of minor countries together with their people by means of the noble Dharma.

Further, if virtuous men or women plant virtuous roots in connection to the Dharma by listening to one teaching, chanting one prayer, making offerings, giving alms, repairing damaged stupas, rebinding and restoring scriptures, or performing any small virtuous deeds, as long as they can dedicate their merit to the full enlightenment of all living beings, they will experience supreme and wonderful happiness for numerous lives. For instance, if they generate a pure altruistic motivation even for an instant and chant “*Namo Amitabha*”, “*Namo Buddha Shakyamuni*”, “*Om Mani Padme Hum*”, or “*Om Vajra Sattva Hum*” only once, as long as they engage in any of these virtuous deeds, they will accumulate merit little by little. It is similar to successful businessmen who accumulate their wealth step by step instead of trying to make a large amount of money all at once. Virtuous roots can only grow gradually and require one’s long-term effort.

The Buddha did mention one important factor. For those who only dedicate the merit to their own families or for their own personal benefit, such as only for their own peace, happiness, and health, they will only receive the resultant benefits for three lifetimes. On the contrary, if they dedicate the merit to the full enlightenment of all sentient beings, their beneficial rewards will be endless

and inexhaustible. The results of giving indeed differ massively depending on whether one dedicates it to the Dharma Realm or for his personal benefit.

The literal meaning of the sentence “To give one is to receive ten thousandfold in return” is a bit difficult to understand. While translating this sentence, I spent quite a long time looking through various commentaries on this sutra, trying to figure out its meaning. Based on my understanding, its original Chinese meaning should be “They abandon one and thus give up ten thousandfold that comes in return.” To “abandon one” means to abandon the essential mind of bodhicitta, that is, if one makes dedication only to their own benefit, they have abandoned bodhicitta. Consequently, they have given up a ten thousandfold reward. Or the other way around, we can say that to give rise to bodhicitta, one is to receive a ten thousandfold reward.

Many commentaries on the sutra interpret this sentence differently, and some of them are simply wrong. The reason why I explain it this way is that the previous text says that if one dedicates the merit with bodhicitta then one will enjoy happiness for hundreds of thousands of lives, but should one dedicate the merit merely to one’s own benefit, one can only receive a small amount of reward for three lives. Making dedication with a selfish mind signifies

that one has abandoned bodhicitta, the key element to receiving a bountiful reward.

## Daily Chanting Practice

In regard to daily chanting practice, such as reciting a certain sutra or some prayers as everyday homework, some believe that the chanting cannot be interrupted otherwise its blessing power will be lost and that buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Dharma protectors will be displeased. This is not really the case. No interruption is certainly best. But as long as we do not suspend the chanting for an extended period, it is okay to have an occasional break if we are too busy.

However, the risk is that most people tend to be attracted to the new and abandon the old practice. Some people may be enthusiastic about reciting the *Diamond Sutra* at the beginning but after a while they just lose interest. Others may be passionate about making prostrations but would be cool about it before long. Many of us try to be stable in our practice, forming all kinds of aspirations and setting up a rigid daily schedule that specifies when they would get up and when they would go to bed. They have a strong initial determination which says, "From now on, I will follow my timetable and I will stick to it." But along the way, they may encounter illness, pressures from work, family, and so forth, or

experience emotional difficulties that would put them off the track. They could become so frustrated that they are not even in a mood to eat, let alone engage in any Dharma practice. You need to know that this is understandable and quite normal for ordinary people. Only experienced practitioners are able to maintain a stable emotion and maintain their daily discipline.

We need to know that ordinary practitioners could often be deficient in these respects. If we could only maintain a good mental state, we will surely become much better practitioners. However, to maintain a positive mental state really requires the support of great merit. For most ordinary practitioners, it is not unusual to have a break from their daily practice or to backslide on their Dharma path. Even though many people may not show obvious signs of retrogression, they could still be dealing with their own afflictions and faults. The bottom line is we all need to persevere no matter the situation and never totally give up regardless of what kinds of ups and downs we experience. When our practice is interrupted for any reason, there is no need to be anxious, frustrated, or worried, nor should we stop halfway and never resume our practice. It would be a real shame otherwise.

No matter what practices we engage in every day, even as little as just reciting the Mani mantra or the *Heart Sutra* once, offering one lamp in front of a buddha statue, or making a few prostrations,

we should never abandon them permanently. Unlike people who have grown up in places like the Tibetan regions or Bhutan, the virtuous habits of most of our Dharma practitioners may not be that strong. For people who have grown up in places where Buddhism is their core value and culture, the concept of karma and causality is well set in their hearts and they would not easily stray from the path. However, for most Buddhists in this modern society, the environment of their upbringing, the education they have received, and the people they associate with daily, are mostly non-Buddhists and lack Buddhist faith. In this context, the tiny bit of virtuous root they have cultivated through the Dharma in this present life is as rare as a flash of lightning in an endless dark night. It is precious and transient like the light of a candle in a gale that can be easily extinguished.

We need to learn to protect this virtuous root in ourselves and in others. When we see someone regressing from their faith or behaving against the Dharma, we should try to offer them appropriate help and support so that they can regain their faith and stay on their Dharma path. Many people who used to struggle a lot are now resolute practitioners simply because others had kindly supported them in their time of need. On the road of life and our Dharma practice, there are all kinds of traps that can lead us to the wrong way. We must be vigilant in our own practice while also

paying attention to helping those around us when they are faced with difficulties and their faith start to waver. We should try as much as possible to help them overcome these setbacks.

## The Preservation of Dharma Teachings

In this part, the Buddha talked about rebinding and restoring Buddhist scriptures. In Buddhism, there are many extremely precious ancient scriptures and texts. Western cultures seem to attach great importance to the preservation of old documents. They would often incur significant expense and use high technologies to restore them even when the damage is very minor. In contrast, people in certain parts of Asia tend to pay less attention to such details, for example we may not think it is such a big deal if we have a precious manuscript of a sutra from the Qianlong Emperor period.

Even more important than the preservation of ancient scriptures, we should maintain in good order the teachings of great masters. I have said before that my sincerest wish and aspiration are to keep all the teachings of H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche available to the world, not losing any little piece of his teaching or even a simple joke that His Holiness had said. Although people today may not see the benefit of these teachings, it will be extremely advantageous to the future beings tens to hundreds of years later. Due to the inconceivable power of a great master's aspirations, his

or her teachings can auspiciously impact beings of different times and generations. Even a short teaching from a great master such as His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, Ju Mipham Rinpoche, or the Omniscient Longchenpa is invaluable. Although Longchenpa had left this world for more than 600 years, we have seen numerous people received blessings and inspirations from his teachings and are eager to receive even a small piece of his teaching, cherishing these precious teachings like gold or a wish-fulfilling jewel. Therefore, we should attach great importance to the preservation of Dharma texts and the precious teachings of our lineage masters.

In order to maintain them in a safe condition so that they would not be damaged easily, we should build properly authorized libraries or heritage museums to hold these documents or store them in similar facilities. If they are kept in private storage, they could be easily damaged. I used to have a very famous and precious thangka which was given by Tulku Tishta, a great late master from Dhomang Monastery. In order to assure its secure preservation, I later donated it to an official cultural heritage museum. It is better not to keep particularly precious objects to ourselves lest they are dealt with improperly upon our death. It is a lot safer to assure their protection if they are put in a place that is officially safeguarded by the government or a reputable organization. The many books and cultural relics that have been collected by the British Museum

from numerous sources now tell the different histories of different peoples to the whole world. This is a good way to restore Buddhist scriptures.



## Dedication

May the merit resulting from this piece of work contribute  
in the greatest possible measure to the long life of all great masters,  
to the flourishing of the Buddhadharma,  
and to the welfare of all sentient beings.

It is always our wish to present a work of the highest quality to the readers so that anyone who reads this text would find inspiration. So we would very much appreciate your comments, feedback or suggestions for how this text might be improved and made more valuable. You are also greatly welcomed if you want to make a contribution to any of our other projects of translation.

Please email us at: *[translation@khenposodargye.org](mailto:translation@khenposodargye.org)*



For Non-Commercial Use Only